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# 'Behind Indian Teeth': The Use of Humour in Contemporary Native American Film

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A minor dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements  
for the award of the degree of Masters in English in American Studies.

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2004

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

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Date: 13 february 2004

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## Abstract

This thesis primarily addresses the use of humour and the comic in four films about contemporary Native Americans, largely by Native Americans (*Smoke Signals*, *Powwow Highway*, *Medicine River* and *Dead Man*). Emphasis falls on the importance of these types of positive self-representations in counteracting the legacy of stereotyping and appropriation surrounding the image of the Native American, particularly the concept of the stoic, humourless, 'vanished American.' The nature of comedy as a genre rooted in survival and endurance is discussed, and its usefulness in depicting the situation of modern Native Americans is explored – highlighting the presence of comedy in traditional Native American culture that has influenced contemporary experience. The four films are therefore discussed and analysed in terms of their use of comedy and humour, their contributions to images of Native Americans and the important issues they raise regarding the difficulties surrounding identity formation for Native Americans living in the modern world.

*Smoke Signals* is the only film under discussion written, directed and produced solely by Native Americans. It illustrates the difficulties of negotiating Native American identity within the context of white America and employs a strong level of satire to attack stereotypes of Native Americans, ultimately pinpointing the need for flexibility and humour to navigate the modern world. *Powwow Highway* is primarily a road trip movie that focuses on two disparate Native American characters journeying towards self-acceptance, learning the importance of a balance between modernity and tradition. *Medicine River* takes the form of a homecoming story and focuses on the importance of family and community, as well as tradition, in the lives of Native Americans. The final film, *Dead Man*, is discussed due to its success in showing a positive, non-Native representation of Native Americans, with a use of humour that privileges the Native American audience.

## Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I must thank my supervisor, Associate Professor Lesley Marx for all her patience, wisdom, guidance, encouragement and red pens, as well as her shared passion in all things Native American. The exploration of a topic that has long been an interest of mine would have remained untouched if not for her pioneering the MA in American Studies. You have made this a wonderful experience and I am truly grateful.

I must also thank my parents and brother for their love, support and patience – for putting up with frayed tempers, the hogging of the computer, for always encouraging me to follow my passions and interests, and for being the three people in my life who have never asked the dreaded question, “So what are you going to do with a Masters in American Studies?” Particular thanks, too, must go to my gran, without whose financial support, none of this would have taken place.

Last but not least, my friends all deserve a huge thank you for their understanding and endurance of my year-long absence during what has become known as ‘The Big T.’ I have to name names, though, and single out my lifelines and co-American Studies classmates, Gretchen Rudham and Michelle Sacks. Words are quite simply not enough.

### A Note on the Title:

‘Behind Indian Teeth’ is adapted from an expression found in Sherman Alexie’s short story entitled ‘Amusements’ in the collection *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*. The protagonist, Victor, wants to hide his fear behind “Indian teeth” – or as he explains it, the quick joke.

## Introduction

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It seems safe to say that, in the (white) popular imagination, the Native American disappeared at the end of the nineteenth century – some time at the end of the armed resistance to white encroachment on Native land. There is no ‘pre-white’ world for the Indian and they tend to occupy a space somewhere between the 1820s and the closing of the frontier in about 1890 (Money, 1997). There appears to be a general failure to address the present or future position of the Native American, and despite the fact that just twenty years ago “Modern Indians [were] among the fastest growing ethnic or racial groups in the United States” (Murray, 1982, 5), there is little evidence in popular culture to suggest this to be true. Native Americans are thus relegated to a single historical role (usually in the form of savages overwhelmed by the process of civilisation and progress) and the diversity and richness of tribal groups, original cultures and beliefs that persist today remain largely obscured.

As David Murray (1982) suggests, history continuously presents a socio-Darwinian justification that Native Americans just weren’t meant to survive. This idea of a lack of survival skills remains despite a historically documented, wide and varied response to white settlers by different groups of Native Americans. Desmond Morton (2001) notes, for example, that in the War of 1812 Indian allies helped save Canada, and gave valuable assistance to early settlers: “Without the full co-operation and assistance of natives in showing the Europeans their methods of survival, their territory, and their resources, the early explorers and settlers would have perished in even greater numbers” (16). Groups of Native Americans such as the Iroquois had already developed sophisticated farming methods and were settled in substantial villages, and the so-called Five Civilised Tribes of Cherokee, Choctaw, Creek, Chickasaw and Seminole in the Southeast were said to be “far advanced in civilisation,” developing a written language and learning English (Hertzberg, 1971, 8). Despite this evidence, an “absolute distinction between a doomed but coherent Indian society and a demoralised remnant, vanishing either literally or culturally, persists in the white view of Indians up to the present, with damaging consequences” (Murray, 7). This view completely ignores the reality of cultural continuity and of what Murray terms “creative adaptation” (7) to another culture and tends to ‘anthropologise’ Indians – relegating them to an existence in an abstract, ethnographic past. Hazel Hertzberg attributes the rise of the disappearing Noble Savage stereotype to the social scientist’s view of evolutionary stages of human development – from barbarism to civilisation. Indianness was seen as innate and as

essence – a rung on the evolutionary ladder – and thus in losing culture, the essence of ‘Indianness’ was lost, Indians no longer existed (Murray, 6). Speaking on the Canadian experience, R. Bruce Morrison and C. Roderick Wilson (1989) explain that the Canadian government set up systems to decide who was or wasn’t Indian, giving citizenship to those who renounced tribal life, but despite this, “Canadian native societies have demonstrated the capacity and will to make major accommodative changes to their new circumstances, and to maintain their separate identities” (523). The pervasive stereotype, however, of the vanished American continues to draw focus away from the realities of contemporary Native American society, and as Murray suggests, this has far-reaching consequences for Native American identity, political autonomy, as well as the global understanding and acceptance of a modern Native American. Murray also suggests that all the guilt, confusion and regrets surrounding the history of white treatment of Native America hides the fact that the ‘vanishing American’ never really did vanish (1982, 5).

Popular media have contributed much to the unfortunate cliché of the ‘extinct Savage’ and film, television and literature have cemented such stereotypes and used the image of the Native American for their own ends. The cinematic world, particularly through the popularity of the Western, has fixed the image of the Indian not only temporally, but also typically. As Mary Alice Money (1997) points out, the stereotype of the Plains Indians as the only type of Indian, Cooperian ‘good’ versus ‘bad’ Indians, the noble savage and the idea of Indians as only “savages” or “victims” (364) show and “influence the society’s collective evaluation of Native Americans, no matter how false, demeaning and racist these images are” (364). These images take on a “semblance of reality” (363) and depict a white, Euro-American version of historical truth – seldom showing the Native American as anything other than a flat, two-dimensional character type. The Native American becomes the clearly definable Other and layers of social, ideological and political constructions result in this all too familiar stereotype. As Hazel Hertzberg (1971) explains, in comparison to the linguistic, cultural and demographic diversity of Native Americans, early Europeans were a far more homogenous group, with similar cultural and historical experiences, and a linking language of Latin to facilitate cross-cultural communication. There is an implicit irony evident, then, in reducing the more diverse group of people to a stereotype, but the term *Indian* “was a way of differentiating aborigine from European” (1) and a way of distancing the ‘civilised’ Self from



the barbarous Other. Hence, the ability of Native Americans to adapt and change was ignored. The use of Indians as a persecuted and then vanished civilisation has extended, particularly through film, to become an all-purpose metaphor for wider socio-political issues (for example, the Civil Rights movement, Cold War paranoia or anti-Vietnam sentiment), once again detracting from the present situation of real Native Americans. The Indian has 'disappeared' and thus serves as the ideal 'martyr metaphor'. As Money (1997) suggests (supporting David Murray's thesis), there is a "desire to avoid confronting the sins of the past" (371). Films such as Michael Mann's *The Last of the Mohicans* (1992) and Kevin Costner's *Dances With Wolves* (1990) allow the audience to escape the horrors of the genocide that took place – creating a safe distance from historical truth. The result is that the reality and experiences of Native American peoples is distorted, diluted and even trivialised (Kilpatrick, 1999) and "modern Indians are made invisible by the presence of their mythic predecessors" (Murray, 9).

Although film (and particularly the Western) has in its own right done much to contribute and even create the negative image of the long-vanished Native American, it is also a medium that can aid in destroying negative stereotypes. It is an expressive form with a wide audience and a powerful influence and several filmmakers over time have tried to present a positive image of the Native American. Delmer Daves, Arthur Penn, John Ford (particularly in his later films) and Costner to some extent have attempted to rewrite the Native American in a positive light. However, these are still Indians of the past. In older films, it is even possible to assume there were no Indians left to play their own roles as white actors or often Meso-Americans played the Indian parts. It is the modern Native American, therefore, that still lacks proper representation in mainstream film. More contemporary films that centre positively on Native Americans, for example, *Dances With Wolves* or even John Woo's more recent *Windtalkers* (2002), still deal with the past (post-civil war in the former and World War II in the latter). The Indian remains in temporal stasis. Ironically, though much Indian governmental policy has involved an attempt to force Native Americans to assimilate into

Euro-American culture<sup>1</sup>, there is still a refusal to show those who have done so successfully, despite cultural and demographic losses.

Although mainstream cinema and society seem to have chosen largely to ignore the presence of living and breathing Native Americans, Native Americans themselves have not sat back and allowed this to go unchallenged – politically or culturally. A largely Pan-Indian renewal of artistic expression, religious rites, native businesses and political activism (all involving a strong sense of pride in a Native American identity) has taken place over time (Morrison and Wilson, 533). In the 1960s and 70s, Native Americans from different groups joined together to form the American Indian Movement (AIM), highlighting the concept of a tribal nationalism and working with a national network of information and co-operation (Murray, 1982). They held demonstrations such as the ‘Trail of Broken Treaties’ in 1972, which culminated in the occupation of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) building and a year later, the occupation of the site of Wounded Knee on the Pine Ridge Reservation. AIM took a strong stand against the government’s continued failure to address the needs of Native Americans, as well as the corruption and nepotism evident in the BIA, and highlighted the situation of *modern* Native Americans (Murray, 1982; Kilpatrick, 1999). The group was modelled on the Civil Rights movement, but they “often exhibit[ed] a flair and wit less evident in black demonstrations” (Murray, 28). As Murray recounts, in 1969 the group occupied Alcatraz and claimed ‘ownership by right of discovery,’ offering to buy the land from the government for \$24 and some glass beads. These much-publicised events raised the consciousness of the wider population and although misconceptions continued, the position of the Native American as the most deprived group in America on every indicator – poverty, life-expectancy, education, illness (Murray, 5) – was at least beginning to be recognised and addressed.

In the cultural sphere, successful authors such as N. Scott Momaday and Vine Deloria Jnr were also carving a niche for themselves – telling their own stories their own way and receiving recognition for it from the wider audience. Momaday’s *House Made of Dawn* won

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<sup>1</sup> For example, the General Allotment/Dawes Act in 1887 where land was granted to individual Native Americans in order to break down tribal structures or the granting of Canadian citizenship to those who “adopted the habits of civilised life” (Hertzberg, 1971, 5)

the 1969 Pulitzer Prize and Deloria's *Custer Died for Your Sins* was published in the same year to wide acclaim. Dee Brown's highly lauded *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* appeared two years later - creating a perfect media platform for AIM's demonstrations during the same period. Brown's book presents the 'Indian history of the west' (the book's subtitle – emphasis added) and thus the Native American experience, not that of Euro-America. The native voice was finally being privileged and this approach continued within the film arena, with Native Americans finding their own voices and ways to tell their own stories in their own manner. The possibilities of self-determination allowed Native Americans to “define themselves *to* themselves rather than be defined culturally by stereotypes, and economically and politically by paternalistic administration” (Murray, 39).

A striking element of Native literature and film is the strong presence of comedy – a reflection of the deep sense of humour characteristic of many Native American people (particularly evident in traditional trickster tales) – and one which Native, as well as non-Native, writers and filmmakers have made some attempt to capture (Daves, Jarmusch and Costner for example). As Darby-Li-Po Price (1998) explains, “Contrary to the dominant conception of Indians as humourless, stoic, and tragic, humour and comedy have always been central to Native American cultures” (*n.p.*<sup>2</sup>). Jace Weaver (1997), quoting Paul Littlefield, also highlights the strong element of humour in much Native American traditional orature: “From the early days of European settlement on the continent, Indians had demonstrated that they could not only laugh at themselves but also have a good laugh at the expense of the whites” (141). The stoic Indian does in fact have more than one expression and laughs and cries just as others do – and also occupies a space in the modern world. Although much contemporary Native literature and film does not seem to shy away from the grim realities of reservation life, for example, there is also a strong element of what William Gleason (2000) calls a “caring use of humour” (115), whether in a subtle or a more overt way. The effect of this use of humour is, in many cases, to effectively turn anger and hatred into humour – “the weakness of suffering is transformed into the strength of

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<sup>2</sup> The journal articles (sourced from an electronic database), as well as the website references used, appear without correct pagination, hence *n.p.* – indicating no page. The initial reference will indicate such, thereafter it is to be assumed that no correct page numbers appear for those particular articles and just author-date will be given.

laughter” (128). Laughter becomes a “critical force” (128) behind the instinct for survival and illustrates the endurance of the Native American beyond 1890.

The humour used in Native American film and literature draws on the elements of traditional beliefs and culture (for example, as mentioned, the use of the trickster figure) and often refers intertextually to the history and treatment of Native Americans, but many of the elements also echo the classical models, theories and uses of comedy and the comic. Different theorists outline different reasons for how and why we laugh – for the function of comedy and its value in human interactions. The general agreement seems to be that there is more written and devoted to tragedy than comedy, but comedy is by no means a lesser form – in fact often it is more successful than tragedy in imparting messages and it can emerge in “phrase, gesture, incident, situation, and narrative comment” (Gleason, 115). As Northrop Frye states, “something gets born at the end of comedy” (quoted by Gleason, 128). Laughter not only creates pleasure, but it functions on broader levels too. It can be instructive, corrective, a “release or discharge of emotional energy” (Freud, in Gleason, 121), a “tactic for survival” (Sypher, 1981, 25) or even a defence mechanism. It is, as Wylie Sypher suggests, intensely social in nature, but also provides an escape from the pressures of authority and society itself. Perhaps, however, it is Robert Corrigan who best describes the immense power and utility of comedy:

All comedy celebrates humankind’s capacity to endure; it dramatises the fact that no matter how many times we may get knocked down or fall short, we somehow manage to pull ourselves up and keep on going. There is something almost biological about the comic – and this is the source of its energy as well as its appeal to audiences. It reveals the unquenchable vitality of our impulse to survive. In spite of the many failures we may and do experience – our tragic fate – the comic spirit expresses elation over our condition because it is so supremely conscious of the way life pushes on, the many ways it continually asserts itself. The spirit of comedy is the spirit of resurrection and the joy that attends our experience of the comic is the joy that comes from the realisation that despite all our individual defeats, life does nonetheless continue on its merry way. (1981, 8)

The comic forms part of our need as human beings to 'play', as Johan Huizinga describes it (in Gleason, 118) – whether it be in war, sex or even imaginary worlds – as we indulge in the theatricality of life. As Freud (1908) explains in *Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, the pleasure we gain from nonsense counteracts the serious nature of life and through “play and jest” (195), we can regain the freedom from inhibition that we enjoyed as a child. As we are discouraged from talking nonsense or acting senselessly from a young age, we later seek out a way to escape “reason and substitute a childlike state of mind for the adult” (196). We therefore play out different roles, particularly, as Corrigan suggests, in order to figure out “life’s mysteries” (1981, 3) and create and use the imaginative constructs of dramatic form to do so: “one of the oldest, most persistent and most satisfying of these forms is comedy” (5).

Though often granted less credibility than tragedy, comedy is in fact perhaps a more useful form for what it allows the sender or receiver to do and feel, and it often shares elements of the tragic. Corrigan asserts that underlying the feelings of pleasure that the comic allows is a certain sense of confusion and disturbance – as well as a sobriety that gives the comic definition and allows one to take the overarching message seriously. There is therefore a certain point at which the serious and the Aristotelian ‘ludicrous’ meet. As the playwright Eugene Ionesco stated, “comic and tragic are merely aspects of the same situation” (quoted in Corrigan, 12). Comedy becomes the window through which we can view the serious. Although comedy can be accused of being an escape from reality, as Christopher Fry (1981) explains, it is an escape “not from truth but from despair: a narrow escape into faith” (17). It acknowledges the serious aspects of life, but also provides a solution. It allows for the possibility of change – “a new and more honest reality seems possible because in comedy good sense always triumphs” (9). The comic thus provides a space to deal with the tragic, but also promises renewal.

The very origins of the comic stem from primitive fertility rites (Sypher, 30) and thus it celebrates life and vitality, renewal and release. Susanne Langer (1981) describes comedy as “an art form that arises naturally wherever people are gathered to celebrate life” (70). F.M. Cornford (1981) suggests, too, the influence of Bacchanalian celebrations which provided a space and a sanctioned release from the ordered nature of society. This illustrates the Freudian wish to return to a childlike state – the wish to return to a point where reason does

not rule action. Sypher (1981), however, suggests that the comic contains some elements of the scapegoat ritual and thus sets up a conflicting dynamic of sacrifice versus celebration, cruelty versus festivity, and ultimately life versus death (30). This speaks to the dual nature of comedy – its light-hearted function, but also its underlying sense of seriousness and what Mary Douglas describes as the inscribed element of aggression (in Gleason, 118). Jokes often subvert, and therefore comedy is useful in attacking authority, order and control. Along with the more primitive aspects of play and relaxation, then, the comic also involves some sense of unmasking – “like tragedy, comedy is homeopathic. It cures folly by folly” (Sypher, 1981, 35). According to Benjamin Lehmann (1981), we don’t just look to be amused. Comedy fulfils a need in us as we are able to laugh at actions and utterances, but as a whole, it more seriously affirms our views on life and supports our human need for the just, happy and good to prevail.

As D.J. Palmer (1984) explains, these ideas can be divided into two veins of thought. On the one hand, laughter stems from ridicule – we laugh at deficiencies (physical, mental) or mistakes and thus release aggressive impulses. This appeals to the corrective and instructive nature of comedy. On the other hand, comedy is related (by Langer and Sypher for example) to what Palmer refers to as “festive rejoicing” (8) and the anarchic, subversive spirit of the carnival. This is where life triumphs. Laughter can be seen as reactionary, for example to pain, or celebratory – but both “give form to the absurdity and formlessness of the modern world” (1984, 21). This, however, doesn’t entirely explain deeper psychological roots of how and why we laugh.

Freud (1908) differentiates between jokes and wit, and the comic. For Freud, a joke is created, produced or constructed and it exists only through language; the comic is rather seen or discovered and can emerge in everyday life. Jokes tend to rely on a tripartite structure involving the teller, the receiver and the target of the joke, whereas the comic usually only involves the dual relationship of observer and observed. Freud also differentiates between “harmless” (128) wit – i.e. wit for wit’s sake and “tendency” (138) wit, which is often aggressive or even obscene, masking a hidden impulse. Harmless wit can be seen as innocent and the pleasure comes from the actual technique of wit, from word play and from the general exercise of wit (Krutnik and Neale, 1990). In “tendentious wit” (1990, 72), however,

the technique of wit merely creates what Freud describes as 'fore-pleasure'. The witticism or joke itself reacts against repression and "eludes the hindrance and so derives pleasure from a source that has become inaccessible on account of the hindrance" (Freud, 1908, 146). In other words, pleasure stems from the fact that a tendency that otherwise would have remained unfulfilled, is gratified. Thus, indirectly, aggressive impulses are released and the object of the joke can be ridiculed circuitously. Freud highlights the unconscious pleasure in these actions: "Everyone who allows the truth to escape his lips, in an unguarded moment, is really pleased to have rid himself of this thought" (156).

Freud illustrates this unconscious element of the comic by comparing what he calls "wit-work" to his concept of dream work. Latent dream thoughts, when compared to manifest dream content, often express some kind of attempt at wish fulfilment and this is similar to the underlying function of the joke. The unconscious elements of indirect expression or displacement that occur in dreams also occur in jokes – the humorous often emerges in the difference between what we say and what we mean. As Wylie Sypher (1981) explains, the comic reaches into our unconscious and, like the dream, distorts logic and rationality, interrupting our ordinary patterns of consciousness. There is an "interplay between the patterns of surface-perception and the pressures of depth perception" (23). Dreams, however, are by nature a private experience, whereas "the comical appears primarily as an unintentional discovery in the social relations of human beings" (Freud, 1908, 302). Pleasure arises from knowing we can place someone in a comical situation (whether to mock or chastise or correct), but we can also make ourselves comic. We make comparisons (knowingly or unconsciously) between ourselves and the comic object and perhaps, as Freud suggests, we gain the most pleasure from the sense of superiority that comparison gives us. As Krutnik and Neale (1990) explain, the perceived superiority and position of the observer results in an "economy of psychic energy" (72) in the observer, which is then discharged through laughter. In some ways, humour can be seen to operate as a defence mechanism, linked to the "psychic correlates of the flight reflex" (Freud, 1908, 380). The ideas linked to painful feelings are removed from conscious attention and we laugh at something or someone as a means of self-protection, protecting the ego and our perceived position of superiority. Certain ambivalence underlies this superiority, however, because as much as we try and distance ourselves, we still recognise and identify with this other, i.e. the comic

object. Krutnik and Neale, however, identify the fact that any loss of control/position that might occur happens within the safe, “heavily cued context” (81) of the comic and any loss is seen as playful – with an inherent promise of renewal and restoration. There is also ultimately some kind of pleasure in the “aggression against convention” (81) that the loss of control involves. Although we often act unconsciously, we are still protected by the boundaries of form.

Laughter and humour are an integral part of human existence and perform different functions – whether on a conscious or unconscious level. In tracing the origins of the comic back to ancient times, its endurance as a dramatic form is evident. Due to its complex nature and the underlying and essential seriousness of comedy, it can be seen as a useful genre to explore various issues – whether to instruct, correct or release aggression. As Krutnik and Neale suggest, comedy has also formed part of the “industrial and aesthetic regime of Hollywood” (101) across time. Its success lies in the fact that it can parody other forms and can play with, and within, the boundaries of film. “Institutional forms of comedy operate as vehicles for dealing with and making acceptable that which is aberrant or potentially threatening” (261).

Although the films under discussion – *Smoke Signals* (1998), *Powwow Highway* (1989), *Medicine River* (1994) and *Dead Man* (1995) – would perhaps not be instantly classified as comedies, they share many elements of the comic and use humour in an instructive, corrective and even cathartic manner. Helen Jaskoski suggests that there is an intermingling of traditional and European motifs and symbols (as well as genre) that creates a “down-to-earth comic vision” (in Sweet Wong, 2000, 33). As Corrigan asserts, “For every comic use made of a given situation, one can find examples of a serious use of the same situation... the deciding factor is the way the artist has used his materials so they will assume a comic or a serious shape” (7). Although these films often deal very rawly with sensitive subject matter (the harsh realities of alcoholism, death and loss, for example), the use of humour creates a sense of redemption. “If we can laugh wisely enough at ourselves and others, the sense of guilt, dismay, anxiety or fear can be lifted” (Sypher, 46). The examination of the aforementioned films aims to highlight the use of the comic in films by, or about, contemporary Native Americans for these very ends, embracing the fact that humour offers an assurance that



things can change for the better. Comedy “celebrates the fact that despair can be transcended, because of our undying capacity for hope” (Corrigan, 227).

Moreover, an overarching “American Indian aesthetic” (Kilpatrick, 178) links these four films, highlighted by similar uses of humour (particularly in terms of the recurring trickster figure). Spread over a decade, they illustrate different aspects of what it means to be Native American, particularly in the contemporary world. The earliest of the films, *Powwow Highway*, is directed by the relatively obscure director Jonathan Wacks, with only two subsequent films credited to him, the black comedies *Mystery Date* (1991) and *Ed and His Dead Mother* (1993). Neither of these two films – classified as black comedies – appear to have been well received by critics, despite their starring the talents of Ethan Hawke, and Steve Buscemi and Gary Farmer, respectively (<http://www.rottentomatoes.com/p/JonathanWacks>). Very little biographical information on the director appears available. Interestingly, however, he is a white South African who studied at the University of Witwatersrand, relocated to UCLA, and is now teaching in Santa Fe, New Mexico – one of the film’s main locations. *Powwow Highway* itself is based on a novel of the same name by Native American David Seals and thus presents a successful non-Native/Native American collaboration.

The made-for-television *Medicine River* is directed by Euro-American Stuart Margolin – a prolific television director, actor, writer and composer who has directed (and appeared in) episodes of the *Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970), *Magnum PI* (1980) and *Northern Exposure* (1990), to name but a few (<http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0546765/>). The film is an adaptation of Thomas King’s novel, *Medicine River*, and King, who is part Greek, part Cherokee, wrote the screenplay, co-wrote the teleplay and even appears as a minor character in the film (Kilpatrick, 193). Cheyenne/Arapaho filmmaker Chris Eyre’s critically acclaimed *Smoke Signals* is the only film under discussion that was directed, produced and written entirely by Native Americans and is based on the short stories collected under the title *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, by acclaimed Coeur d’Alene poet and writer Sherman Alexie (Kilpatrick, 228). Euro-American independent filmmaker and “reader’s director” (in Kilpatrick, 169) Jim Jarmusch wrote, directed and handpicked every actor involved in his film *Dead Man*. Although the film does not deal with the contemporary Native American experience and therefore departs from the discussion somewhat, it is worth examining for

what it illustrates is possible in terms of positive representations of Native Americans, by non-Natives. The four films, therefore, show the combined effort of Native American and non-Native and although the films are largely independent and thus relatively unknown, they do offer the possibility of a successful Pan-Indian/non-Native co-attempt at fuller, more complex representations of the modern Native American.

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Smoke Signals

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Though by no means its only distinctive feature, the fact that *Smoke Signals* is one of the first films written, directed and (co)produced by Native Americans to receive such wide acclaim certainly places it in its own bracket. As Jacquelyn Kilpatrick (1999) suggests, its success is surprising, not because of a lack of talent on the part of the writer (Sherman Alexie), the director (Chris Eyre) or the actors, but because of a general lack of funding available for Native film makers which often restricts creativity. Funding for this film from the Sundance Institute, however, allowed Eyre, as director, a certain amount of freedom and flexibility not normally possible in small budget films to create his “funny, raging, poignant film” (Gilmore, in Kilpatrick, 229). The story itself, based on Alexie’s *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* relates to specific incidents, yet has a universal quality and a scope wide enough to include a mass audience. Of course the Native American is privileged – particularly by the fact that the main characters are all Native Americans – but a non-Native audience can still appreciate the film’s humour, sensitivity and lyricism.

Kilpatrick notes that Alexie’s screenplay has been criticised for the fact that it does not project enough of a Native American aesthetic. However, as Michael Jones points out, the objective of the film was to distance the story from the typical politics surrounding Native Americans and to show different standards of living, outside of alcoholism, poverty and injustice (in Kilpatrick, 230). As Oneida-Mohawk-Cree stand-up comedian Charlie Hill states, “It seems like everything we do is called political” (in Price, 1998, *n.p.*) The film, though, does still deal with ‘Indian’ problems and is, as Jones states, “darkly comic, magical, beautiful – still tragic, but subtly viewed from the Indian first person” (in Kilpatrick, 230). The story is therefore still recognisable as an ‘Indian’ one, and shows the experiences of Native Americans who live in the contemporary world and have contemporary issues, feelings and responses. The protagonists are two fully realised Native characters and are not sidekicks or buddies in the Tonto tradition, but are central to the narrative. As Alexie himself describes them, the characters are “decidedly Native American, but Native Americans rooted in this time and place and not a fictionalised past” (in West and West, 1998, *n.p.*, hereafter “interview”), which is perhaps one of *Smoke Signal*’s most important aspects. Despite the criticism, the film succeeds in bringing the Native American aesthetic into modern consciousness and stops itself from being obscured by its “mythic predecessors” (Murray, 1982, 9).

The film centres on an inversion of an odyssey theme. As Dan Georgakas explains (interview), instead of the typical warrior/father struggling to turn home, the film deals with the physical and emotional struggle of a warrior/son to find his father, who has left his home and family, and died in self-imposed exile. Alexie elaborates in the interview, explaining that the film is groundbreaking in the fact that it uses such a classical, mythic structure common in the Iliad and even the Bible, as well as that of a road trip/buddy movie and lost father theme to tell its story: "Simply having Indians as the protagonists in a contemporary film, and placing them within this familiar literary and cinematic structure, is groundbreaking." This technique also works humorously as it inverts a classical structure for its own ironic and satirical ends. Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) shows that in classical works, comedy and laughter tend to destroy the epic and break down hierarchical structures of class and status, thus bringing the object at hand closer to ridicule. In using such an archetypal *non*-Native structure, Alexie is able to bring his objects (the characters, as well as overarching stereotypes of Native Americans) closer, in order to examine, invert, criticise and mock them. Victor treats Thomas as a comic object, but he in turn is criticised and mocked, particularly because he takes himself so seriously. "Laughter demolishes fear and piety before an object, before the world, making of it an object of familiar contact and thus clearing the ground for an absolutely free investigation of it" (Bakhtin, 23). As Wylie Sypher (1981) explains, this could also be seen as a kind of "comic clarity" (22). The characteristics of an object are exaggerated, unmasking its core by rendering it ridiculous and showing it for what it really is. Alexie deconstructs stereotypes by illustrating how unfounded and ludicrous they truly are.

Alexie has been hailed as a master satirist and although, as Stephen Evans (2001) shows, he has been criticised by traditionalists for his reliance on Western and American popular culture, Alexie's response is to show that this is, in fact, just a method of using "cultural currency," (*n.p.*) bridging the gap between his Indian characters and a non-Indian audience. Rather than distorting Indian culture or perpetuating white stereotypes of Indians, as he has been accused of doing, Alexie *uses* those stereotypes to his advantage. As Thomas Builds-the-Fire says at one point, "You know, the only thing more pathetic than Indians on TV, is Indians watching Indians on TV." Alexie adds to the overall humour of his work as he

satirically mocks non-Native society and deals with what it means to be Indian, by inverting, destroying or altering the accepted meaning of those stereotypes, “with the moral purpose and social conscience of the true satirist” (Evans, 2001). As Evans suggests, Alexie’s creation of “realistic Indian survival literature” follows C. Hugh Holman and William Harmon’s definition of satire:

A literary manner that blends a critical attitude with humour and wit for the purpose of improving human institutions or humanity. True satirists are conscious of the frailty of human institutions and attempt through laughter not so much to tear them down as to inspire remodelling. (in Evans, 2001.)

Laughter and humour are thus operating here as a “social corrective” (Duprey, in Corrigan, 162) and the viewer can gain strength, and perhaps hope, from recognising and participating in reality as viewed through a kind of “satiric mirror” (Evans, 2001.). As Bakhtin (1981) explains, satire exposes the contrast between a person’s “surface and his centre, his potential and his reality” (35) and therefore Alexie provides the audience with a “modern map for negotiating the realities of contemporary reservation life that can lead to survival” (Evans, 2001). This contradicts Kilpatrick’s criticism that *Smoke Signals* tends to show a Native present that has no hope for a future and in this way falls into the trap of Hollywood stereotyping. Although Alexie does show the reality of reservation life (including alcoholism, poverty and loss), a “caring use of humour” (Gleason, 2000, 115) allows for a sense of redemption and survival against the odds. The very place that Victor and Thomas travel to – Phoenix, Arizona – suggests a renewal and a rebirth: that special “something” that is “born at the end of comedy” (Frye, in Gleason, 128).

The protagonists of *Smoke Signals*, Victor Joseph (Adam Beach) and Thomas Builds-the-Fire (Evan Adams), present an inversion of the stereotypical warrior and shaman respectively. Victor is, in Alexie’s words, “beautiful, stoic, clueless” (interview). He may think and act like a warrior but he is still confused, lost and unable to express his hurt other than through anger. Thomas breaks the stereotype and gives us an Indian character we are unaccustomed to – the Indian nerd. The endless stories he tells may be genuine but he is not shamanistic. His big glasses and out-dated suit remove him from any kind of shaman/medicine man role

in the tradition of Kicking Bird in Costner's *Dances With Wolves*.<sup>3</sup> Despite the fact that he is a 'mommy's boy,' he is never reduced to being a sidekick. Alexie thus uses the stereotypes employed and recognised in American popular culture (particularly in the Western) and inverts them – a technique that Henri Bergson describes as “the sudden comic switching of expected roles” (in Palmer, 1984,107). Alexie also explains that the two characters represent some kind of “schizophrenic multiple personality” struggle within himself between being a “story telling geek like Thomas” and a “big jock masculine guy like Victor” (interview) and thus they are more than just interesting character types, but two aspects of their creator.

The filmic narrative follows what Krutnik and Neale (1990) explain as Evanthius's classical comedic structure – with an *exposition* (the events leading up to and including the journey to Phoenix), a *complication* (the car wreck on the way home) and a *resolution* or reversal of fortune (Victor and Thomas avoid being arrested). At this point there is also the transformation from ignorance to knowledge and particularly for Victor, a sense of acceptance. Although the odyssey is often dark and sombre, it is lightened by humour, which helps the two travellers find their way. As Christopher Fry (1981) states, in comedy, “there is an angle of experience where the dark is distilled into light” (17). Alexie plays with our expectations and builds suspense, only to break that down again. For example, Victor and Thomas are hauled into the sheriff's office and are accused of causing the car wreck. The first shot of the scene is from behind the two, looking into the office. Behind the sheriff, there is an intimidating rack of rifles and he is clearly placed in a position of power. Thomas sits nervously in his chair, but Victor refuses to, standing and perhaps trying to convey an attitude of the stoic warrior. The white man, Burt Cicero, who in fact was the one whose drunken driving caused the accident, accuses Victor of being drunk, and of assaulting him. We don't expect the white sheriff to believe the pair– particularly because of the stereotype of the drunk and bloodthirsty Indian (despite Victor's assurance that he has never touched a drop of alcohol in his life), because of what we know of white treatment of Native Americans, and the way in which the scene is constructed. The only other white male characters we have come across were the two racist rednecks on the bus and so we do not hold out much hope that Victor and Thomas will escape this situation. Thomas's very lame “We was framed” doesn't

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<sup>3</sup> In a humorous moment on the bus trip, we find out that Thomas has, however, seen *Dances with Wolves* over a hundred times.

seem to add any credibility to their story, but at what seems the bleakest moment for the protagonists, there emerges what Krutnik and Neale describe as the “comic surprise... [which] stems from the occurrence of unforeseen and unforeseeable events” (41). In a “sudden comic switching” (Bergson, in Palmer, 107), the sheriff reads them Mrs Cicero’s report in which she states that her husband is, “And I quote, a complete asshole.” For once, the Indian ‘wins’ and is allowed to walk away unscathed. Even Victor and Thomas are amazed. Victor says later, “I can’t believe we got out of that guy’s office alive” and Thomas’s response is, “Yeah, I guess your warrior look does work sometimes.”

Although much of the humour in the film works on playing with stereotypes and audience expectations, there is also a sense of the darker side of laughter. Thomas, as the often irritating “geek” (interview), is an easy target for Victor’s aggression – not only physically. Victor employs the aggressive and often cruel side of humour to lash out and Thomas becomes an object of ridicule. An immediate contrast is set up between the two characters in terms of appearance, with Victor being the obvious athlete, who hangs out with similar, basketball-loving friends, and Thomas the lonely, ‘four-eyed’ nerd who tries to tag along. Victor draws attention to this by mocking him: “Nice suit, Thomas.” This is cleverly echoed later, when the two characters are on the bus and Cathy the gymnast compliments Thomas, “Nice suit.” Thomas rewards Victor’s look of disbelief with a ‘told-you-so’ smile. Thomas does not allow Victor to upset or rile him, despite Victor’s generally unpleasant attitude. In a flashback to their youth, when Thomas asks Victor if he knows that different things burn different colours when you set them alight, Victor very cruelly mocks him, asking, “You know Thomas, I was wondering, what colour do you think your mom and dad were when they burned up in that fire?” As D.J. Palmer (1984) states, “...some of the greatest comedy is perilously close to tears, of bitterness, of anger, of despair” (8). Victor’s laughter is filled with pain and here, he uses humour in what Charles Baudelaire (1981) describes as one of its key functions – in order to feel superior to Thomas and thus to make himself feel more secure (314). Victor is able to distance himself from the ‘comic object’ and in laughing at Thomas, he can avoid identifying with him, and simultaneously deflect his own feelings of pain. Laughter acts as a “form of defence” (Krutnik and Neale, 80) for him, protecting his own ego. It is easier for him to laugh at Thomas than it is to confront his feelings of hurt and anger, particularly towards his father.



As William Gleason (2000) suggests, though, “Laughter can wound or it can bond” (128) and there are moments on the journey when Victor and Thomas connect over a joke. After Victor and Thomas’s seats on the bus have been taken by the two white men, one of whom tells them “Why don’t you and super injun there find some other place to have a powwow, okay?” Thomas points out that the cowboys always win. The two then discuss John Wayne and how one never sees his teeth in his films. “I think there’s something wrong when you don’t see a guy’s teeth.” This leads them into singing a humorous song (written by Alexie) about John Wayne’s teeth and whether they are real or not, which is taken up on the soundtrack by traditional singers, who blend English lyrics with Indian vocals and traditional drums (interview). Alexie explains this as an attempt to blend the two cultures, while still favouring Indian artists (interview). This signals the end of their bus journey as the pair arrive in Phoenix, Arizona.

As much as the film deals with Victor’s need truly to find and accept his father, it is also concerned with a search for identity, and particularly with what it means to be a Native American. This, of course, provides a platform for much of the humour in the film – particularly as it attempts to address the “painful reality of lives that have become distorted, disrupted, destroyed, and doomed by their counter-impulses to embrace or deny traditional Indian culture, to become assimilated to or resist absorption into white civilisation – or both” (Evans, 2001). Near the beginning of the film, Victor’s friends ask him who he thinks the greatest basketball player of all time is. He answers, “Geronimo.” It is not very likely that Geronimo would have played basketball as we know it, but no one points this out. In fact, his friend merely jokes, “Geronimo? He couldn’t play basketball man, he was Apache. Those suckers were three feet tall.” Victor’s response is “He was lean, mean and nasty and he would dunk your flat Indian ass.” Victor thus identifies with a famous warrior and draws history into the present. When Thomas asks him, “What about your dad?”, he responds, “What about him?” For Victor, being Indian is about being a warrior – and as he is disappointed in his father (his alcoholism, his disappearance), he chooses to reject him and turn to history (and its stereotypes) for what it means to be Indian.

This is even more evident on the bus journey. Fed up with all Thomas’s stories, Victor asks him why he cannot have a normal conversation. “You’re always trying to sound like some

damned medicine man or somethin'. I mean, how many times have you seen *Dances With Wolves*? One hundred? Two hundred? ... Don't you even know how to be a real Indian?" Here, Alexie draws attention to the kinds of stereotypes perpetuated by Hollywood, and how this affects Indian identity. When Thomas responds "I guess not," Victor says he will have to teach him: "First of all, quit grinning like an idiot. Indians ain't supposed to smile like that. Get stoic." Victor has chosen to appropriate the image of the stoic warrior, because he feels that is the only way to gain respect from others. He also feels that unless you "look mean, white people will walk all over you." He then tells Thomas, "You gotta look like a warrior, you gotta look like you just come back from hunting a buffalo." Thomas breaks off in mid-stoic posturing and says, "But our tribe never hunted buffalo, we were fishermen." This pokes fun at Victor's choice of what it means to be Indian, as he himself is merely conforming to a stereotype and it also points to the inaccuracy of many representations of Native Americans, particularly where different nations were homogenised into a single, all-purpose Indian. His response creates even more humour as he replies, "What? You want to look like you just came back from catching a fish? This ain't *Dances With Salmon*, you know." Victor's attitude implies that one must use what one can get and create identity from that – especially when one's immediate role model (i.e. the father) is absent.

Victor also tells Thomas that he needs to learn how to use his hair properly. As he runs his hand through his own hair, he says to Thomas, "Free it. An Indian man ain't nothing without his hair." He insists that Thomas get rid of his suit. The next scene is of Victor leaning against the bus (looking stoic) and gazing up into the sky, as the bus driver stands impatiently looking at his watch. The camera then cuts to Thomas, emerging from a store. In slow motion, his hair (released from its habitual braids) blows in the wind and he approaches Victor. He is, however, wearing a T-shirt with a badge on the front that says 'Frybread power' and although he is supposed to be learning how to be 'stoic,' he does not leave his sense of humour behind. Victor, however, is happy with what he sees and gives him a big grin, shaking his hand. The bus driver looks on, shaking his head in incomprehension. This transformation, however, is soon shown to be worthless, as when they return to the bus, they discover their seats have been taken by two white men. As Thomas comments, the "warrior look" doesn't always work. Walter Kerr (1981) illustrates that there is an unfortunate double bind in the comedic. It reveals "folly," but also contains some kind of

innate disappointment in that folly. There is a feeling of exasperation with the self and as Kerr explains, in the comedic realm, suffering can only really be accepted as part of life. It cannot be purged as in tragedy (which employs suffering as its central focus) and therefore it emerges in a disappointment with the self. However, Kerr also shows that this exasperation is turned into energy and vitality, which ensures comedy's survival. Victor and Thomas may be lost and fatherless, and their "warrior look" doesn't always work, but they are at least attempting to discover their identities as contemporary Native Americans (including negotiating the legacy of 'Hollywood Indian' stereotypes), most often through laughter.

The idea of lost fathers is a central aspect of the film, and forms part of the protagonists' search for identity. As a theme, it also resonates across ethnic boundaries. As Alexie points out, feelings of abandonment are common across white and ethnic groups, though they differ in the sense that often with white families, abandonment is emotional rather than emotional as well as physical, as for ethnic people (interview). The two characters deal with their personal loss in different ways. Thomas uses his memories and stories of Arnold Joseph as his hero and saviour as a substitute for his own father who was killed in the 4<sup>th</sup> of July fire. As he tells his stories, particularly to Victor, there is also the sense that he wants to help Victor see his father in a different light and help him come to terms with his ambivalent feelings of love and hate towards him. Victor has essentially rejected his father and, when the pair arrive at Suzy Song's, Victor even refuses to take the can of Arnold's ashes and it takes all Suzy's powers of persuasion to get him to go into Arnold's trailer and collect his belongings. Victor has to work through his pain and accept that his father did not abandon him, but was reacting out of guilt, and this is emphasised by a photograph that he finds in Arnold's wallet of his father, mother and himself, with the word 'home' written on the back. Although, at this point, Victor allows himself to grieve for his father (by cutting his hair), he still has not reached peace. Death is just Arnold's final disappearing act, emphasised by a Houdini poster on the wall of Arnold's trailer that is picked up by Victor's torchlight.

Victor is only able to reach a point of acceptance after the car wreck. As he runs down the road (echoing an earlier scene when he runs after his father's pickup as Arnold leaves his family for the last time), he has several visions of his father and flashbacks from his past. He also sees his father standing at his basketball hoop at night, illuminated by a spotlight, and

hears him say, "It's not about magic, it's about faith." He then sees an image of him as Thomas saw and described him at the Spokane Falls, reaching down to give him a hand. He finally can identify with what Thomas was trying to tell him about his father and at this point, he is able to accept 'help' from the vision, taking his father's hand. We then cut to a shot of a road worker helping him up. Victor has finally been able to exorcise the ghosts of his past and this is even more apparent in the sheriff scene. When the sheriff reads Cicero's allegations that Victor was drunk, he denies them vehemently – telling the sheriff in no uncertain terms that he has never had a drink in his life. He makes a clean break from his father and asserts the fact that he will not repeat the same mistakes he has made.

Interestingly, the sheriff asks "Just what kind of injun are you?" Although Victor responds by telling him they are both Coeur d'Alene, the implication is that the sheriff cannot believe he could be an Indian and not drink. This of course adds to the tension of the scene. Once they have been excused of the charges, the sheriff tells them that he still has a problem. He recognises the basketball for what it is (throwing it to Victor), but then he takes out the can of ashes, places it on the desk and while resting his hand on the lid, asks them what it is (possibly expecting some kind of Indian 'medicine man' explanation). Victor then says "It's my father." The sheriff quickly removes his hand and asks, "Your father?" Victor has come to terms with his feelings towards his father and is finally able to claim him, "Yes, my father." Although he has obviously made the decision not to repeat his father's mistakes, he has finally allowed himself to come to terms with his father, and thus his own identity.

This central issue of the absent father also speaks to the wider issue of what it means to be a Native American. As Alexie explains, in Indian cultures, men particularly have lost their traditional societal roles (interview). Although in different nations there are male and female roles and people often move back and forth or accept neither role, the traditionally male roles of hunter and warrior no longer exist. "I mean, driving a truck for the BIA is simply not going to fulfil your spiritual needs" (interview). It can be seen that in some senses it is Indian men who have lost more than Indian women. Many of the stories, too, in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* have an autobiographical element and deal with Alexie's struggle with his father's, as well as his own, alcoholism (interview). Alexie explains that the film offers a lighter vision than the stories (where Victor is in fact an alcoholic) and he attributes this to the fact that while he was writing the book, he himself was still drinking. In

the film, he attempts to free the story from effects and tries to look, rather, for causes. He attempts to look more deeply and explore the “emotional, sociological, and psychological reasons for any kind of addiction or dysfunctions within the community” (interview). He also explains that although Victor makes a break from his father (in rejecting the life of an alcoholic), he also makes a break with his other ‘father’ – Alexie, his creator.

An important thematic element, signalled by the title of the film is that of fire. At one level, the title conjures up images of Indians with blankets saying ‘How’ and sending up smoke signals, which in itself contains an underlying humour intended by Alexie (interview). The title also, however, acts in a contemporary sense and signals “calls of distress, calls for help” (interview). Victor and Thomas are, as Thomas’s voice-over narration at the beginning of the film states, “children born of flame.” The smoke from the 4<sup>th</sup> of July fire, which ironically burns up Mr and Mrs Builds-the-Fire on white America’s Independence Day, sets off the events of the film and is a fire of destruction and loss. The camera rests on the image of the burning house, and in slow motion, we watch the flames almost poetically engulf it.

However, when the baby Thomas “flies” from the upstairs window and is caught by Arnold, both seeming to glide towards each other in slow motion, we are offered some sense of hope. As Thomas’s grandmother says to Victor’s mother, Arlene, about his name: “It’s a good name. It means he’s going to win.” Near the end of the film, when Suzy Song sets fire to Arnold’s trailer, the camera moves from looking out of the trailer at Suzy, to a wide shot. Smoke rises from the fire and billows out into the air, signalling the beginning of the resolution of the film. Although the events of fetching Arnold’s ashes from Phoenix are based on autobiographical events (Alexie accompanied a friend to Phoenix to fetch his friend’s father’s ashes), the name of the place is symbolically significant as it speaks to the theme of flames and ashes, and offers a sense of redemption and renewal. This is therefore a cleansing fire – purging Victor, particularly, and helping him reach a state of acceptance, if not forgiveness. By understanding that Arnold left because of his guilt over starting the first fire, as well as the fact that he did run back into the burning house to save Victor, he is able to forgive and move forward. He is also able to stop being what Thomas describes at the beginning of the film as one of those children who are “just pillars of flame that burn everything they touch.” It is interesting that Alexie only allows Victor to connect with his father once his father has been cremated and is thus reduced to ashes. In a touching

moment, Victor also finally understands and accepts Thomas's own need for a father and pours some of Arnold's ashes into Thomas's 'piggy bank.' Images of fire thus begin and ends the film's (and the characters') odyssey.

The journey/road trip theme of the film is highlighted by the comical characters of Velma and Lucy, who spend their days reversing through the reservation. The two characters are named after the protagonists of *Thelma and Louise*, which, as Alexie points out is the quintessential anti-road movie – deconstructing the masculine stereotypes of the macho road trip (interview). The fact that this comic duo's car drives only in reverse also functions on different levels. As Alexie explains, for him, it acts as a visual metaphor for his saying, "sometimes to go forward, you have to reverse" (interview): just as Victor has to return to his past to forgive his father. The car also represents the circular notion of time common to Native American tradition in which the past, present and future are all the same. Although the reversing car is broadly funny, there is no explanation and therefore it also acts as a type of in-joke, or what Alexie calls an "Indian trapdoor" because "an Indian will walk over them and fall in, but a non-Indian will keep on walking" (interview). Like Lester Falls-Apart's van, that has been "broken down at the crossroads since 1972", the car also speaks to the typical dilapidated Indian reservation cars that we see piled in the used car lot in the film *Powwow Highway*.

As Julie Tharp (2000) comments, "Automobiles serve, in much Native literature and film, as expressions of characters' differences from and relationships to the larger culture" (n.p.). Cars tend to personify a clash between Native American and mainstream cultures and as Tharp explains, they "physically [assume] the lumps, bruises and poor treatment of many Indian peoples." The car can, however, as in *Smoke Signals*, also fulfil a humorous and ironic function. Velma and Lucy appear to be on a never-ending road trip and they exploit the typical themes of the road movie of the desire for escape and freedom. The characters themselves are also humorous and Alexie uses them to create satirical observations. The camera appears to sit in the backseat of the vehicle and the two girls are framed by the windshield. Lucy (the driver), leans back and guides the car by looking out of the back window. As she drives, she complains that she is thirsty: "Gimme a beer." As Velma reaches down to a cooler, she stops and says, "Hey girl, we don't drink no more, remember." This is

not a fact easily forgotten, but it adds to the humour of the situation and shows a lighter side to the reality of a high rate of alcoholism among Native Americans. Lucy replies, “That’s right, enit? Well, give me a Coke<sup>4</sup>, then.” When the girls stop to pick up Victor and Thomas, they insist that the pair trade something for a ride: “We’re Indians, remember, we barter.” Thomas jumps at the opportunity to tell a story and Alexie is able once more to satirise white perceptions of Native Americans. The two girls settle down in the car to listen and the camera moves to their point of view, framed by the passenger window. Thomas leans towards the car and assumes his story-telling stance (eyes closed and hands clasped together), while Victor stands at a disinterested distance behind him. Thomas tells the girls how, in the sixties, “Arnold Joseph was the perfect hippie, because all the hippies were trying to be Indians anyway. But because of that, he was always wondering how anybody would know when an Indian was trying to make a social statement.” Once he has finished his story, Lucy asks Velma what she thinks, and she jokes, “Well, I think it’s a fine example of the oral tradition.” When the two drop the boys off, they mock them, asking them if they have their passports. Thomas naively says that they are still in the United States, not a foreign country and Lucy’s response is that that is as foreign as it gets. For the Native American, white America is still a ‘foreign’ place, with a different culture that needs to be carefully negotiated.

Another important vehicle in the film is Arnold’s pick-up, which Victor inherits after his death and is his only physical connection to his father. Many of the ‘flashforwards,’ as Alexie calls them<sup>5</sup> (interview), of Victor’s childhood involve the pick-up, particularly a scene where Victor and Arnold ride together and Arnold tells him how he feels magic enough to make everything disappear – including himself. We only realise the full impact of this scene (it is set on Independence Day – the anniversary of the fire) when we find out it was Arnold who caused the fire. The car, for Arnold, symbolises some form of escape and he tries to use it in order to disappear, just as he uses alcohol for the same purpose. In a poignant scene, when Arnold finally leaves for good, Victor runs after the car and jumps on the back (foreshadowing Victor’s run for help). Arnold stops and pulls him out, hugging him fiercely

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<sup>4</sup> This humorously refers to the ‘substitute addictions’ of soda drinks that Alexie deals with in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*.

<sup>5</sup> Eyre uses pans and tilts of the camera to allow the narrative, often framed by Thomas’s stories, to unfold in reverse, without the awkwardness of conventional flashbacks. This also works in conjunction with a circular sense of time (Kilpatrick, 231).

and then jumps back in the car and speeds away. The car, although obviously in better condition than Velma and Lucy's, still only starts every fourth attempt and this adds a minor point of tension to the action, as well as symbolising the dysfunctional nature of its owner.

The pick-up also serves as an interesting element in Victor and Thomas's relationship. The journey to Phoenix takes place on the bus and so it is only on the journey home, in the more private space of the pick-up, that the two can be free of the more threatening aspects of white America, and the white racists they encounter (Tharp, 2000). Ironically, however, this is where they have their most serious argument, and where Thomas stands up for himself and gives Victor a piece of his mind. While they travel on the bus, in a place "as foreign as it gets," they are forced to work together and bond as Indians in a white world. In the truck, however, they have to confront their individual differences and notions of identity. Thomas in effect tells Victor that although he may see himself as a warrior, he has in fact merely sat back and wallowed in his misery. He also accuses Victor of being worse than Arnold, because although he stays in the same house as his mother, he has abandoned her emotionally. Victor, however, also confronts Thomas about the element of lies in his stories. He emphasises the fact that Thomas only has his imaginary version of Arnold the hero, and does not see the reality of Arnold as drunken abuser who "beat up" him and his mother. In the closed space of the vehicle, emphasised by the close-up cross cutting between Victor and Thomas, the unlikely companionship that has grown between these two different people is sorely tested and seems irrevocably broken. The complication of the car wreck, however, leads to the resolution of the film, as Victor is forced to look outside himself and his misery. In the accident, as Tharp suggests, the truck is almost purged of the bad memories associated with it, and when the pair arrive home, the truck acts as a closed space that is not claustrophobic, but rather comforting, and they are able to reconcile their differences. Importantly, Victor is able to step outside his pride and apologise to Thomas, "I'm sorry about every wreck". Vehicles thus offer "some of the most painful examples of loss," but also "some of the best examples of Indian humour" (Tharp, 2000).

An important aspect of the film is the use of music. Alexie himself wrote five of the songs used on the soundtrack (including the very amusing 'John Wayne's Teeth') and they form an "inherent and organic" part of the narrative (interview). As Alexie's beginnings were in



poetry (Evans, 2001), he uses the songs as one would poems, but he exploits the fact that songs are often more accessible than poetry. They also form a concrete addition to the filmic narrative. The songs offer another layer of expression and can also speak to a wider audience – providing a different way to tell the story. One of the songs used, called a “Million Miles Away,” appears at the beginning of Victor and Thomas’s journey. Although it refers to the physical distance between the reservation and “Mars, Arizona” (as Thomas refers to Phoenix), it also refers to the distance between people. As Alexie describes it, “It’s a sort of battered and bruised love song” (interview). The lyrics speak to the idea of human frailties, and the ability to love someone despite those frailties. This echoes Holman and Harmon’s definition of satire mentioned earlier: “true satirists are conscious of the frailty of human institutions and attempt through laughter not so much to tear them down as to inspire remodelling” (in Evans, 2001). Another important song is that entitled “Father and Farther,” which is used at an important moment in the film as Suzy sets fire to Arnold’s trailer and we follow its ‘smoke signals,’ as well as the boys’ return journey. The camera pulls back to an establishing shot, tracking the car as it travels down the highway, through beautiful landscape, just as it also moves out from the trailer and follows the smoke. The song lyrics work in conjunction with the narrative and subtly add to its underlying themes.

As Joy Harjo says, “Part of the process of healing is to address what is evil” (in Evans, 2001). Although *Smoke Signals* does not shy away from the harsh realities facing modern Native Americans and often tackles them ironically and satirically, the film also offers a sense of hope that through forgiveness and acceptance, one can find the means to go on. In employing a “self-reflexive cultural humour” (Evans, 2001), the film blends Indian history, Western popular culture and realistic reservation life to evoke the pain and humour implicit in “bicultural fragmentation” (Evans, 2001). The film also does not avoid showing the difficulties of identity formation within this fractured state, but points out the usefulness of tradition, as well as a measure of flexibility needed in adapting to or appropriating pieces of other cultures. The strong use of humour to negotiate this tricky field is perhaps the film’s greatest strength and as Alexie states, “I think humour is the most effective political tool out there, because people will listen to anything if they’re laughing” (interview). What *Smoke Signals* offers, then, to a Native and non-Native viewer alike, is a sensitive, hopeful film that

encourages a variety of audiences to accept the social realities and difficulties of the modern Native American.

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Powwow Highway

University of Cape Town

Directed by Jonathan Wacks, *Powwow Highway* is a beautifully constructed film that attempts to deal with a wide range of issues surrounding what it means to be a Native American in contemporary society. One of the most striking elements of the film is its shape-shifting quality, which disallows any strict generic classification. Wacks has borrowed and blended different elements of the classic road movie, buddy films, action films, westerns and comedies. As Jacquelyn Kilpatrick (1999) suggests, the film's shape shifting is intentional on his part as this not only speaks to Native tradition, but also allows the deconstruction of existing generic stereotypes. Sherman Alexie criticises the film for succumbing, in turn, to its own stereotypes of representation (interview), but there is no doubt that Wacks successfully tackles serious issues and creates two complex and well-rounded protagonists who present different aspects of contemporary Native American identity. Plot is in consequence secondary to the characters of Philbert Bono (Gary Farmer) and Buddy Red Bow (A Martinez) who represent two recognisable 'types' in the Indian community: the more traditional and the more political respectively. The unlikely pair move together through varied and recognisable settings (a reservation, a powwow in a high school gym, a pool bar and location shots of Santa Fe, New Mexico), and as Kilpatrick notes, this guarantees a certain level of success with a Native audience. The familiarity of the people, places and the narrative allows a sense of recognition and identification on the part of a Native audience, but the film (particularly through its character development) has enough resonance to ensure certain success with a non-Native audience too.

The simple plot allows the characters to form the film's central focus and as Philbert leads Buddy on a circuitous route to rescue his sister, the audience gains more insight into each character, and their unlikely friendship. Perhaps more importantly, the audience is also able to encounter various Native Americans along the way who live in different circumstances, but who still maintain a network of contact. This broader scope highlights the reality of reservation life as well as that of urbanised Native Americans, destroying any notion of a 'vanished American'. Although the film does not ignore the reality of poverty-stricken reservations (in fact much of the opening sequence of the film focuses on dilapidated buildings, emaciated dogs, burnt land and broken cars on the Lane Deer reservation) it also shows the reality and resourcefulness of Native Americans surviving despite continued social and political obstacles. As mentioned above, David Murray (1982) makes the point that

despite being the most deprived group of people in America on every indicator, modern Native Americans are still among one of the fastest growing racial or ethnic groups in the United States. *Powwow Highway* successfully shows the cultural continuity and “creative adaptation” (7) to modernity and white America, by Native Americans.

The familiar road trip trope not only exposes the audience to a wider Native American population than that of a reservation, but also signals Philbert and Buddy’s respective journeys towards self-discovery. The careful construction of the two disparate characters and the way they interact ensures that the story unfolds along those lines of difference. While Philbert’s journey takes the form of a traditional Cheyenne warrior quest to earn his warrior name, Buddy’s journey is one that leads him towards a greater understanding of his real place within the tribe. Buddy, however, needs the assistance of the trickster Philbert, and particularly his knowledge of tradition, to reach that point of understanding. As Roger Ebert (1989) explains, to Philbert, the journey is more important than the destination and there is the definite sense that he feels the best way to get somewhere is not necessarily via the most direct route. This sorely tests Buddy’s quick temper and limited patience and rather humorously undercuts his own idea that he is the one ‘in charge’ of the road trip. Ebert also suggests that the film offers a meditation on how many Native Americans understand the land in terms of space rather than time, emphasised by numerous scenes where the camera is allowed to focus on the natural landscape. Philbert, a gentle trickster, is the perfect guide to teach Buddy to live in the “fullness of the moment” (Kaiser, 1984, 87) and open himself up to new experiences and possibilities.

Buddy Red Bow is a paradox. He sees himself as a defender of his community, but the more political his actions have become, the further removed he is in a spiritual sense, to the point where he doesn’t understand what being a member of the tribe really entails. He is able to look after the tribe’s financial needs and help prevent exploitation by the B.I.A, represented by Sandy Youngblood (Geoffrey Rivas), but he has lost touch with his own ancestral roots. Although he sees himself as a true Indian and is the first to accuse others like Sandy of being ‘apples,’ he is himself also out of touch with what it means to be Indian. He tries to solve problems in a totally modern way and unlike Philbert, has no concept of a balance between modernity and tradition, nor the possibility that one can learn valuable lessons from

traditional stories. Philbert, like Harlan Bigbear in *Medicine River*, has to map out the community for Buddy and help him reconnect with people and places he has forgotten about, and in so doing, teach him about his identity as an Indian and his place within a wider network of friends and family. Like Thomas Builds-the-Fire in *Smoke Signals*, Philbert also uses stories indirectly to instruct Buddy about his heritage and show him the value of “old Indian wisdom.” While on the way to Denver, Philbert tells Buddy, Imogene (Margot Kane) and Wolf Tooth (Wayne Waterman) a story about Wie'tou the trickster, who “likes pulling antics and telling dirty jokes.” The lesson the story teaches is that often one “chase(s) shadows while the truth hangs over your head.” Imogene and Wolf Tooth are impressed by Philbert’s knowledge, telling him he should be the tribe’s historian, but Buddy misses the implicit lesson and retorts angrily that the old “fairy stories” can’t stop the reservations from being turned into “sewers,” nor stop “white America” from taking tribal resources. Buddy’s reaction is understandable considering the past treatment of Native Americans and highlights a very real problem faced by tribes, but Philbert is unperturbed. He explains that the stories do help, as often the problems themselves do not change, nor the types of people involved, thus illustrating that the underlying lessons of the old stories are applicable across time. He subtly illustrates the importance, as well as the relevance, of tradition and listening to the “stories of our ancestors.” Philbert also asserts confidently that “Wie'tou the trickster” won’t let white America destroy the Indian, “for Wie'tou is also the creator of the universe. He will play a little trick on the white man. You’ll see.” Buddy is by no means convinced, and interestingly, the camera pulls back to reveal, in the background, a stack of factory chimneys belching smoke into the air. It is not clear whether Wacks is trying to emphasise the danger that white America and its greed for natural resources present to Native Americans, in spite of Phil’s assurances. What is clear in this scene, though, is that Buddy still has a long way to go before he stops “chasing shadows” and accepts that the “truth” is right in front of him.

The success of Buddy as a character is that he is a recognisable ‘type’ – a heavily politicised, AIM member involved in the protracted occupation at Wounded Knee in 1973 and an ex-Vietnam veteran (a Native American character rarely shown). He is a well-respected member of the tribe and he holds the important position of Agricultural Purchasing Agent. Although he is highly confrontational and attempts to solve problems head on, his motives are pure as

he aims to do what is best for his people. He is often aggressive and his hot temper leads him to jump to conclusions and get involved in fights, as illustrated in a scene when he and Philbert buy a car radio from a white salesman. The condescending salesman automatically assumes that because they are Indians, they have no money and tries to sell them a cheap radio, telling them “You don’t understand – no get-um special deal on this one, chief.” Buddy, already incensed by the salesman’s racist attitude, immediately assumes they have been swindled when the radio doesn’t work. He leaves Philbert in the car and runs back into the store to attack the salesman. Wacks sets up a humorous scene as the camera cuts from Buddy attacking the salesman and smashing everything in sight (including the shop window) with a fire axe (a play on a traditional tomahawk), to Philbert in the car, fiddling with the radio. He finds the manual and within seconds gets the radio to work, as there is in fact nothing wrong with it. The car window frames Philbert’s face as, completely oblivious to what is happening, he closes his eyes and hums along to the music. The diegetic sound increases and as we continue to hear smashing glass, shouting and swearing, Philbert finally realises what Buddy is doing and reverses Protector (which has now become a getaway car), to the shop entrance. As Buddy leaps into the car window, the salesman emerges with a gun and fires at them as they speed off, Buddy whooping with the exhilaration of ‘battle.’

This scene clearly illustrates the difference between the two men – Buddy prefers to act first and think later, automatically assuming the world is out to punish him, whereas Philbert is slow and meditative – solving problems quietly and thoughtfully. Through Buddy, however, one can also see the kinds of problems faced politically and socially by Native Americans, as well as how easy it is to become disillusioned and suspicious due to their continued abuse by white America, often aided by other Native Americans. As Buddy says in the tribal council meeting scene, “This ain’t the American dream we’re living. This here’s the Third World,” illustrating how the concept of the American dream, as well as American law, does not apply to Native Americans. Buddy, however, is overly antagonistic and angry, often at the expense of his personal relationships. As Rabbit Layton (Amanda Wyss) points out, Buddy was too busy “saving the world” to worry about his sister (whom we learn he hasn’t seen in ten years before her arrest) and, as Jimmy the Vietnam veteran (Graham Greene) tells him, he “got mean.”

The negative side of Buddy's personality is highlighted near the beginning of the journey when he and Philbert go to a roadside diner for a meal. As they sit at the counter, Buff (Wes Studi) comes in and insults Phil's car and laughs at Buddy for even riding in it. Buddy's concern with appearances is evident as he then tells Phil that he is worried about his clothing. He plays on Philbert's wish to become a warrior and tells him, "If you want to be a warrior, you got to dress right. That's an essential part of the ritual." Buddy's true motives are transparent. He is more concerned that people will associate him with Philbert because they are travelling together, rather than showing genuine concern for Philbert's warrior quest. Humorously, the scene is turned around and ends up poking fun at Buddy's detachment from his cultural heritage in not being able to speak Cheyenne. With his mouth full, Phil says something unintelligible to Buddy, who says rather earnestly, "Is that Cheyenne?" Philbert swallows and repeats himself, "Ain't got no bread for buckskin." Buddy's sense of superiority is undermined and instead of laughing at Philbert for dressing badly, we laugh at Buddy for taking himself so seriously. As Wylie Sypher (1981) explains, this is a kind of "comic humbling of the proud" (50) in which Buddy's own ridiculousness is unmasked. The scene, perhaps for a Native audience in particular, serves a social function. Although one is encouraged to laugh at Buddy at a distance, the incident also highlights the importance of maintaining culture and tradition (including language).

Philbert, like Buddy, is a complex character, although initially he does appear misleadingly dim-witted. As Kilpatrick states, "His simplicity is easily misunderstood as simple-mindedness" (114). In many ways, he presents the polar opposite of Buddy, both physically and mentally. Philbert is sincere, gentle (despite his immense size), and compassionate and although Buddy is the one who physically looks more like a warrior, Philbert is the one who possesses the spirit and the true understanding of what it means to be a warrior. Buddy fights his battles externally and his warrior status comes from his days as a soldier in Vietnam, his AIM membership, as well as his fights against those wanting to strip tribal land of its resources. Philbert wants to earn his warrior name, Whirlwind Dreamer, in the traditional way by collecting tokens to 'build power'. Importantly, although Philbert chooses to favour his Cheyenne traditional heritage, he is not an out-of-touch New Age Indian, who, as Kilpatrick says, must "speak in aphorisms and exists in the past" (115). Philbert is, however, misunderstood and even mocked, especially by his Aunt Harriet. When he goes to



her to ask about how a warrior gathers medicine, she laughs at him and tells him angrily that she gets “sick of being asked for old Indian wisdom,” signalling a frustration at the stereotype of the wise elder. Just as Philbert is about to leave, Harriet appears to relent and starts telling him what one assumes is going to be a wise tale about the famed Cheyenne warrior Dull Knife. Instead she jokes about Dull Knife telling her great uncle to keep his pony out of his garden. Although this was not what Philbert was looking for, he repeats the last line of her joke thoughtfully and laughs good-naturedly.

It is not immediately evident because of his quiet gentleness, but Philbert displays recognisable elements of a trickster figure. Despite the fact that Buddy believes he is in control and is bullying Philbert into taking him to Santa Fe, it is in fact Philbert who is gently leading Buddy along. He shows the trickster’s disregard for rules and as Robert Corrigan (1981) suggests, like the traditional character of the fool, he operates independently of space and time, and remains unhindered by the constraints of reality. Philbert is perhaps not as active a trickster as Harlan Bigbear in *Medicine River* or Xebeche in *Dead Man*, for example, but as Sypher states, the fool is the “archetypal hero of many guises” (89). Philbert tends more subtly to push Buddy into situations rather than aggressively trick him into them, but essentially he still removes control from Buddy’s hands and in so doing, teaches him to reconnect with his community, come to terms with his past as a soldier and reassess his sense of self identity. Philbert’s trickster nature is also evident in his enormous appetite and his fondness for stories, as well as his association with animals. At a roadside diner, a waitress disapprovingly asks Buddy if Philbert is going into hibernation after he orders enormous quantities of food, and when the pair stay over night with Wolf Tooth’s friend’s house in Denver, he sleeps under a duvet with pictures of animals on it. When the pair leave Denver and are back on the road, Buddy hauls out a gun and starts telling Philbert what he must do when they arrive in Santa Fe. Philbert ignores him and asks for some food and when Buddy opens the glove box to look for some, he sees a huge spider. He is about to smash it with the butt of his gun when Philbert shouts “No!” and swerves off the road. Protector’s passenger door flies open, and as Buddy is thrown onto the ground, his gun smashes. Philbert gently places the spider on the ground and tells Buddy that “The trickster takes many forms. We must keep our medicine good.” Buddy is of course ranting and raving about his broken gun, but Philbert merely says, “Sorry my pony threw you.” Philbert the

trickster, helped by his trusty 'pony,' has removed Buddy's means for acting violently, even though it appears as purely accidental and he finally shuts Buddy up by pointing out that they are near Santa Fe.

Philbert's car, dubbed Protector the War Pony, has enough personality to be a third main character in the film and much of the humour, as well as the action in the film centres on this rusted, wrecked 1964 Buick, as evident in the aforementioned scene. Philbert purchases Protector near the beginning of the film, after he receives what he interprets as a sign in the form of a television advertisement - one of the more sharply satirical moments in the film. As Philbert sits down at the bar, he looks up at the television and the camera moves from the white car salesman wearing a large feathered headdress, to a close up of Philbert's face, absolutely captivated. The advertisement works as a perfect example of the kind of negative stereotyping surrounding images of the Native American, as well as the appropriation of such images, in this case to sell cars. The advertisement also mocks the use of many Native American tribal names, leaders or symbols for cars such as Cherokee, Pontiac, Mustang and Pinto (Tharp, 2000). Perhaps what makes the scene even more amusing (besides the ridiculous looking salesman saying 'How') is Philbert's reaction. He does not get angry or upset at the derogatory advert (which would have made Buddy's blood boil), but rather sees it as a sign. The next scene shows him trudging up a hill, flanked by rusting piles of old cars. Instead of going to the white salesman as one might expect, Philbert chooses to go to Fidel (Del Zamera) to buy himself a 'pony' - an essential part of becoming a warrior. When Fidel tells him to take a look around, he moves to the dirty window and looks out over the field of wrecks. He pictures a beautiful Pinto horse galloping down a hill, joined by a herd of other wild horses. The sepia-tinged image fades to the reality of the car wrecks, but Philbert's smile does not fade and he focuses on the 1964 Buick. Fidel laughs at him when he says "That brown one's a nice one," but is happy to trade some whiskey and a packet of what may be marijuana, or as Kilpatrick suggests possibly sweetgrass, for the car. Philbert is delighted with his purchase and runs up to the car, whooping with delight, removing an old tyre from the bonnet and a plastic Madonna figure from the dashboard. He is especially proud of the fact that he made a trade for the car - that is to say in the old way, and he is one step closer to beginning his warrior quest.

Protector is the perfect car for a trickster and although it doesn't look at all like a 'war pony,' miraculously it survives long enough to help Buddy and Philbert rescue Bonnie, take Wolf Tooth and Imogene to Denver and help to, at the end of the film, escape the law. As Julie Tharp suggests, Protector therefore acts as a talisman with its own power, bringing the characters to safety. She goes on to explain that the car also acts as a cultural expression, commenting on the treatment of Native Americans by white society and illustrating issues of Red/White conflict. Protector physically reflects the ill treatment of Indians, with its scratches, bumps and rust, and subtly and indirectly points to what Tharp refers to as the "throwaway culture" of America. However, like modern Native Americans, Protector keeps going. When a car is discarded by white Americans, it moves down the economic scale and finally ends up on the reservations. Ironically, however, in the case of Protector, the cast off technology of the whites is adapted and used to outwit the (white) law. Philbert rather humorously copies a jailbreak he has seen on a western in a roadside cafe, using Protector to pull the bars off Bonnie's cell so she can escape. As Tharp illustrates, "the Indian car might eventually turn out to be the ultimate trickster;" the ultimate expression of freedom, mobility and space. Protector provides Philbert with the means to reconnect Buddy with his community and also guides them to various sacred tribal spaces such as Sweet Butte and the site of the Cheyenne uprising at Fort Robinson.

Protector is also the setting for humorous and important incidences in the film for Philbert. The expensive radio that Buddy has had fitted in the car includes a CB transmitter. While Buddy is sleeping, Philbert hears someone communicating on the radio and he strikes up a conversation with a trucker named Light Cloud. Light Cloud is surprised by the fact that Philbert recognises his name as that of the Cheyenne prophet and asks him how he knows and Philbert starts telling him about an episode of Bonanza. Once again, this pokes fun at the appropriation of Native American culture and images as Philbert mentions that "of course there was a white guy" playing the Native American character. This also speaks to the problematics of learning one's history and culture via the media. As the trickster of the film, however, Philbert constantly undermines expectations and Light Cloud is pleasantly surprised to hear that it was in fact Philbert's Uncle Fred who told him about Light Cloud. He then proceeds to tell Philbert he must go to Sweet Butte as it is a highly important sacred place and Phil sees this as another important sign. He glances at the sleeping Buddy and then

swerves off to head east for “the most powerful spot in South Dakota.” The CB conversation is a clever element as it allows for a modern understanding, and adaptation, of spiritual guidance. The disembodied voice (that of Floyd Red Crow Westerman) gives Philbert direction and sends him on the true path towards achieving his warrior name. In creating the character of a mysterious trucker, Wacks blends tradition and modernity, creating for the modern audience a more conceivable version of a sign. This is echoed in the next scene when Philbert leaves a Hershey chocolate bar as an offering on the top of the mountain.

Philbert walks up the sacred mountain and on the way, he finds a wooden structure. He sits under it and closing his eyes, he sniffs the air and has a vision of a warrior handing him an arrow. He opens his eyes to see a jackal sniffing him and he asks, “Light Cloud?” As the jackal runs away, he then decides to climb to the top of the mountain, where he lovingly places the Hershey bar on a rock. This is an important step in Philbert’s quest as he begins to build power, evident when he rolls all the way down to the bottom and is confronted by a very angry Buddy. By this stage, Buddy has been informed by a Sioux couple that he is in the Black Hills and he realises Philbert has led them in the wrong direction. He goes up to Philbert and starts shouting at him, but Philbert picks him up like a doll and tells him, “Nobody grabs me any more.” Buddy is shocked into silence at this reaction from the usually non-confrontational Philbert and before he can protest, Philbert has decided that they will go to the Christmas powwow on the Pine Ridge Reservation. Philbert’s unusual reaction causes Buddy to think about his past treatment of Philbert and in a flashback, we see how Buddy bullied and insulted Philbert as a boy. This obviously has an impact on Buddy as he starts to assess his treatment of Philbert and accepts that Phil is perhaps not quite as stupid as he had always thought. He also rather reluctantly starts to accept that he has no control over the road trip and when Phil pulls off the road and wades into a river, singing, he sighs and follows him into the icy water, trying to join in (rather unsuccessfully at first).

The Christmas powwow is an important moment for Buddy. Philbert immediately notices the bone choker he is wearing and asks him what the rosetta is. Buddy explains that it is his Purple Heart and Philbert approvingly tells him, “You should be proud of it. Wear it more

often.” As Kilpatrick notes, the choker is an apt symbol for Buddy – a perfect combination of his character traits and sense of identity as a soldier and an Indian. Buddy soon has a confrontation with the corrupt Pine Ridge tribal leader Bull Miller (Adam Taylor) and his “goon squad” who have been harassing Wolf Tooth and Imogene. Buddy finds it hard to accept that his friend, fellow AIM member and war veteran would rather leave his home than fight and he provokes Muller, reminding him of an earlier confrontation at Wounded Knee. The two are about to fight when a knife, thrown from the bleachers, stops them. Buddy sees this as a sign of encouragement that someone else is willing to fight and shouts with triumph. The camera pans to the bleachers and picks out Jimmy, who has thrown the knife. Jimmy, far from encouraging confrontation, serves as an unnerving example of what violence can do. As Wolf Tooth explains to Phil, Jimmy fought with them in Vietnam and was imprisoned in a tiger cage for thirty-one months, having to slit four people’s throats to escape. Kilpatrick, perhaps overly critical, asserts that this is a somewhat pedestrian explanation, but it certainly explains why Jimmy stutters and weeps uncontrollably, and emphasises the senseless nature of violence. Buddy tries rather unsuccessfully to make conversation with Jimmy, who tells Buddy he must go and dance. Buddy scoffs at the idea and says disparagingly, “Look at these people dancing around a basketball court. You’d think a few feathers and some beads was a culture or something.” Buddy is shocked when Jimmy tells him that the real problem lies within him, “No. You got mean.” Buddy has very obviously never thought of himself as “mean” with regards to his own community, especially as he has spent all his time fighting for their rights, but it strikes a chord within him and slowly he moves off to go and dance. It takes him some time to get into the rhythm, but he soon does and his enjoyment is evident as he smiles broadly. He is finally getting ‘in step’ with his community and realising the value of culture and tradition.

Robert Corrigan states that the presence of the trickster acts as an assurance that everything will work out for the best, and true to Philbert’s earlier promise, the trickster finds a way to play a trick on the “white man.” Although Buddy has grown and has begun to accept the importance of his heritage, he still charges into the jail, demanding to see his sister. He has no luck with this approach and as they are told to leave, Philbert mumbles that he needs to “take a leak” and disappears. We later see him descending a flight of stairs into a darkened room. Miraculously, he finds the jail’s unguarded, unlocked vault and helps himself to piles

of money. Once again, the trickster operates outside of the rules and in so doing, he is able to get back Rabbit's bail money and replace the money meant to purchase bulls for the tribe that Buddy has spent on the road trip, with some to spare. As Philbert tells Buddy and Rabbit, they merely need to "Stop worrying and trust the powers." Buddy, however, has not yet learnt to let go of his anger entirely and when he sees Sandy Youngblood in a bar, he confronts him. Dripping with sarcasm, he tells the white waitress that it is "illegal to sell firewater to injuns" and that despite how it appears, Sandy is in fact an Indian. He then insults Sandy, saying, "Sometimes you have to bite the apple to see the worms." Buddy sees Sandy as a sell out and tells him contemptuously that at least his "red" doesn't come off. This incident emphasises the important issue of corruption within tribes and the fact that it is not only whites who are to blame for the ill treatment of Native Americans. For all his faults, Buddy is proud of being an Indian and would not betray his people as Sandy has done.

While Buddy is getting himself into trouble, Philbert is quietly and calmly acting. He fetches Bonnie's children and devises a plan to free her, using what he saw on television. Once again, Philbert plays with the audience and does the unexpected – pulling the bars off the cell window. This incident is full of what Krutnik and Neale (1990) describe as "comic surprise" (41)– one does not for a minute think that Philbert would try such a thing, nor that it would in actual fact work (considering what bad condition Protector is in), but he does. He is aided by Chief Joseph (Sam Vlahos), who has driven to Santa Fe to find out what is happening with Bonnie, distracting the federal agents and lying to one of them who asks if he has someone fitting Philbert's description in his tribe. Amusingly, he tells the agent, "Must be Navajo." Chief Joseph is a welcome change from the wise old chief stereotype and he is resourceful, getting things done quickly and efficiently. He helps Buddy and Philbert further by releasing cattle on the road, stopping the police from getting to them before they reach Pueblo land. The implication of this, as Kilpatrick points out, is that they will be safe once on Indian soil. This reinforces the general 'anti-Dawes Act' sentiment conveyed in the film - highlighting the importance of tribal self-governance and of the protection of tribal land and resources.

The film ends with a final “comic surprise” (Krutnik and Neale, 41). Protector’s brakes fail and everyone is forced to leap out of the car. Bonnie’s son Sky refuses to leave “Whirlwind” and Buddy has to drag him out of the car with him. Protector careens off the edge of the road, with Philbert still inside and crashes, bursting into flames. Buddy collapses with grief – he has come to love and respect Philbert and is shocked at his death. As the family and Rabbit huddle together, they hear a noise and see Philbert coming up the hill looking rather confused and a bit upset, telling them “My pony threw me and now he’s dead.” The trickster has survived, to everyone’s amazement and joy. He has also managed to rescue Buddy’s choker that was hanging from the rear-view mirror and hands it to him, telling him “This is yours.” The men embrace and they head up the hill to Chief Joseph who is waiting to take them all home. Protector has become, as Tharp suggests, the “ultimate trickster” outwitting even the trickster himself and saving the day.

Ultimately, *Powwow Highway*’s success is in the fact that it manages gently to blend humour, adventure and action, to illustrate the position of many contemporary Native Americans. The road trip motif allows for a broad view of different, three-dimensional Native Americans, who through both characterisation and their actions subvert existing stereotypes of Indians. The film is by no means as overtly satirical or biting as Chris Eyre’s *Smoke Signals*, but the well-rounded protagonists still manage to highlight key issues surrounding the political and social experience of Native Americans in the modern world. The film comments on the existing negative attitudes of many whites towards Indians, but simultaneously shows the potential for white/red friendships (as with Bonnie and Rabbit). Through Philbert, the importance of cultural heritage and the possibilities of using history to negotiate modernity is felt and he shows that it is possible to maintain a balance between custom and modern living.

Medicine River

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Stuart Margolin's *Medicine River*, based on Thomas King's novel of the same name, is perhaps more easily categorised as a comedy than the other films under discussion. It is certainly a more gently humorous story and as Jacquelyn Kilpatrick (1999) describes, it speaks in a "low, soft, very funny voice, but it is a voice that can't be ignored" (195). As a made-for-television movie, its audience is far more general than for films such as *Smoke Signals* or *Powwow Highway*, but Margolin's extensive experience, particularly in television directing, ensures that, in terms of scope and quality, nothing is sacrificed to the smaller screen. In many ways a homecoming story, the filmic narrative has a universal feel – creating a highly accessible story for a mainstream audience. The film, however, does not achieve this at the expense of its Native American protagonists. It takes a realistic approach to the ideals, issues and beliefs of Native Americans and the Other is privileged, though without the level of searing satire used by Alexie in *Smoke Signals*. King, in his novel and his screenplay, consciously avoids attacking stereotypes – offering alternatives rather than criticism (Kilpatrick, 1994). He attempts to show different ways of seeing and tries to strike a balance, allowing what he calls the idea of "continuing the conversation" (193) and depicting Native Americans as they are today, with a rich sense of humour. As Indian stand-up comedian Charlie Hill explains, "Real Indian humour is grassroots stuff, it's about things in the community" (in Price, 1998, n.p.).

According to Kilpatrick, perhaps the greatest difference between the film and King's novel is due to genre. The novel uses a stricter Native American chronology and it has the space and time to look extensively at the protagonist, Will's childhood, filling in details and giving more background to the characters. The film works within a more linear timeline, avoiding the use of flashbacks, and so loses some of the subtlety and depth of the novel. The problematic consequence as identified by King himself (in Kilpatrick, 1995) is the fact that the film's central focus becomes Will's search for identity and King asserts that he did not want to imply that those Native Americans who leave a traditional area or reservation automatically experience difficulties when returning. As David Murray (1982) explains, "it is perhaps easy to see urban Indians as alienated, marginal individuals cut off from community and Indianness altogether" (22) and this is precisely what King tries to avoid. Nevertheless, the film, through the richness of its characters and its wider message of community and belonging, ultimately avoids merely being a homecoming story or prodigal son tale. Like

*Smoke Signals*, the film also attempts to answer the important questions of “Who is an Indian? How do we get this idea of Indianness?” (King, in Kilpatrick, 198), which has implications not only for full blooded Native Americans, but also those of mixed descent, as well as for traditionalists and more ‘modern’ Indians.

This question is perhaps best dealt with through the characters of Big John Yellowrabbit (Ben Cardinal) and Eddie Weaselhead (Michael C. Lawrenchuk). The two argue with each other about what clothing signifies in terms of identity. Big John, in his Italian suits, represents the modern, assimilated Indian who values white culture and dresses ‘white,’ but Eddie accuses him of being an ‘apple’. Eddie, on the other hand, is trying to maintain tradition – but only seems to achieve this on the surface as he attempts to show the correct ‘look and feel’ of an Indian<sup>6</sup>. Big John, however, accuses him of modelling himself on a Hollywood stereotype. Both men are lost, searching for an identity through the more superficial elements of appearance. The film does not favour one or the other and neither is seen to be ‘right’ – showing the issue to be far more complex than a case of right or wrong. In a humorous moment in the Friendship Centre, shortly after Will’s arrival, the two end up on either side of him, arguing. Will is caught in the middle and, looking from Big John to Eddie, shows surprise at Eddie’s rather outrageous Mohawk hairstyle. Will can therefore be seen to be somewhere in the centre of this debate. Although he initially appears to be more like Big John and is even complimented by him on his suit, he soon learns to appreciate his traditional background and his dress becomes more like that of a modern ‘Indian’.

Interestingly, Will is the only character in the film with a short, Western haircut. As Victor tells Thomas in *Smoke Signals*, “An Indian man ain’t nothing without his hair” – it is a vital aspect of what it means to be Indian which Will, consciously or unconsciously, has rejected. Will does, however, offer us hope for a compromise between modernity and tradition, though not immediately – he still has to be instructed and led a merry dance by the trickster of the film, Harlan Bigbear (Tom Jackson). Although the scene between Eddie and Big John may appear somewhat contrived, it raises an important issue and explores it through the accessible vehicle of humour. As Sherman Alexie states, “people will listen to anything if

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<sup>6</sup> As it is suggested the character of Xebeche/Nobody does in Jarmusch’s *Dead Man*.

they're laughing" (interview).

The film begins with a shaft of light filtering through a dark room onto a man's face, highlighting his eyes. Gunfire is heard in the background and a soldier opens a door, throwing more light onto the dazzled person inside, who is swiftly hauled out. From the broken buildings, the soldiers and streaks of blood on a wall, this is an obvious war zone. The camera cuts to another soldier burning photographs. We soon learn that the prisoner is a photographer and he is ordered to take a picture of the leader. The camera then moves to a beautiful sunset, framing the Toronto skyline and we hear Will's voice-over (Graham Greene), saying how he almost didn't make it out alive. The film therefore offers a viable reason for Will not having been at home to receive his brother's messages about his mother's illness and subsequent death, and it also allows us some idea of his profession and lifestyle. As a photographer, Will is set up as an observer rather than a participant, and that is an important aspect of his character – he prefers to hide behind the lens and not get involved. The importance, too, of photographs themselves is emphasised in this opening sequence and is a trope used throughout the film. Here, the idea of photographs as records is emphasised by the fact that the soldier-in-charge destroys Will's photographs. As Susan Sontag (1978) explains, what the camera records can be used to incriminate and here it is the potential of the camera as "the ideal arm of consciousness" (4) that is being destroyed. However, on another level, in insisting that Will photograph him as he himself chooses, the soldier asserts his own identity, promoting his own sense of self by refusing to become 'ethnographised' by the disengaged recorder.

We don't know Will's surname (and never do) and he doesn't appear to have given much of his background away to his boss/girlfriend Ellen (Janet Laine Green). Distanced from his past, he is thus presented as largely anonymous and rootless. Will has obviously shared very little of himself and Ellen is surprised to discover he even has a brother. As she drives him to the airport, he tells her that he grew up in Calgary and so doesn't really know anyone in Medicine River. As the film progresses, however, we find out that Will's mother, Rose Horse Capture, was a strong member of the Medicine River community and was well known and

liked. We also learn that Will's father was a rodeo rider, but didn't stay with his family. Like Victor Joseph, Will has an absent father.

As Kilpatrick explains, even though Will did not grow up in Medicine River, and he hasn't been back for about twenty years, because Native American lineage is traced through the mother's line, it can still be regarded as his community. Will therefore finds himself going reluctantly back to his roots, and he is not left alone there for very long. When he arrives at his mother's house (the taxi driver has to tell him which one it is illustrating how distanced from the community he has become), he walks in, looking for James. The house is dark and empty and as he looks around him, he sees a collection of photographs on a table. He picks up two and moves towards a lamp next to an armchair. He places one of the photos on the table next to him and it appears to be a picture of his mother, as a young girl, in a traditional dress. Sontag (1978) explains the significance of photographs in the family: "through photographs, each family constructs a portrait-chronicle of itself – a portable kit of images that bears witness to its connectedness" (8). From the moment Will re-enters the community, his reconnection begins through the medium in which, as a photographer, he is most comfortable.

The scene cuts to a close up of the photograph, dangling from a hand (obviously Will's, as we recognise it as the other photo he picked up – that of two boys, presumably himself and James – another link in the family chain). Reflected in the photograph is a man's face. As Kilpatrick notes, this is an appropriate way to 'meet' the trickster, Harlan Bigbear - as an upside down reflection ready to turn Will's world inside out, and like the photograph, a means to reconnect him with his past. A character easily recognised by a Native audience, Harlan is always on the move, dodging and diving, and in their initial interchange, skilfully avoiding Will's questions. A true trickster, he tricks others into some kind of self-knowledge and he sets up the action of the film through his meddling. "Like Coyote, Rabbit, or the other tricksters of Native American stories, Harlan has no compunctions about fooling people, about placing them in situations without their consent or even about telling outright lies" (Kilpatrick, 196). As Susanne Langer (1981) explains of the fool, "he is neither a good man nor a bad one, but is genuinely amoral. He is all motion, whim, and impulse – the 'libido' itself" (78). Harlan's schemes are largely successful and even though he sometimes

runs the risk of tricking himself, as Langer suggests, the antics of the fool usually result in “a centring, a healing through self-awareness” (196) for those he tricks.

After avoiding Will’s questions about James’s whereabouts, Harlan hands him a big brown paper bag and tells him to get ready so they won’t be late. We (and Will) assume that he is talking about his mother’s funeral and a bewildered Will is bombarded with names and family connections non-stop from Harlan, as an establishing shot shows Harlan’s red car moving through the beautiful green surrounds. The car as metaphor plays an important role in the film and Harlan’s red 1960s Pontiac convertible becomes a familiar sight cutting through the landscape – in Medicine River and on and off the reserve roads. As mentioned above, Julie Tharp (2000) describes how the car is often used in Native literature as a metaphor, particularly to show how adaptation and acculturation are central issues in ‘Red’/‘White’ conflict. It is no coincidence, therefore, that Harlan’s car is red. Harlan is secure in his identity as an Indian and his car serves as a symbol of his individual freedom and mobility as the trickster. The fact that his car is, as Tharp explains, a once flashy, popular car of the sixties (by this stage about twenty years old) provides humour in itself. The idea of large luxury cars (now faded and old) racing around poor reservations mocks the class-based statement that cars tend to make in modern society – highlighting the ‘hand-me-down’ nature of these types of vehicles particularly in the American context (Tharp, 2000.).

Harlan, as Will’s unofficial (and from Will’s point of view, initially unwanted) guide, uses the car to ‘trap’ Will into seeing the community and its surrounds, leading him to what Langer refers to as a greater “self awareness” (196). The camera, shooting from the hood of the car, frames Harlan and Will behind the windshield and cuts from Harlan to the confused Will. Although Harlan is mapping out the “communal landscape” (Tharp, 2000) of Medicine River by telling him about the various people and their family connections, he also takes time to show him the physical landscape, and attempts to orientate him. Stopping in the middle of nowhere, he tells Will, “Here we are.” Will asks him if they have arrived and Harlan doesn’t reply, but sits on his bonnet and looks out, saying, “Ninastiko.” There is a pause, as Will looks at him and follows the pointing of his chin. The camera cuts to a wide shot, capturing the exquisite view of a mountain in the distance. Harlan tells Will, “in the old days, people used to say that as long as you can see the mountain, you knew you were

home.” Will’s lame, but politely confused response is, “It’s nice.” He misses the significance of what Harlan is saying, even as he looks at Will intently and says, “And here you are.” Humour is created at Will’s expense, as we become aware of what Harlan, as the trickster and guide, is up to. Harlan then finally takes Will to the cemetery and when Will asks him where everyone is, he tells him that the funeral was the week before. This may seem like a cruel joke on Harlan’s part, stringing Will along, but this is the trickster in action, emphasising to Will how detached he has become. Harlan displays obvious sympathy for Will’s loss and as the film unfolds, we also realise that this move was necessary on Harlan’s part. If Will had found out immediately on his arrival that he had missed the funeral, he would have been on the first plane back to Toronto, and would have missed out on finding his true place. Will needs the helping hand of the trickster, to bring him slowly back into the community.

As Robert Corrigan (1981) explains, humour often emerges in the falling short of an already established standard of seriousness. Will takes himself so seriously and finds it very hard to let go, therefore it is all the more comic when he is made to look foolish and when he falls so easily into the traps set by Harlan and his partner in crime and ‘demi-trickster’ Bertha (Tina Louise Bomber). Freud (1908) explores the fact that we can recognise situations where a person appears comic and can therefore make someone comic by intentionally placing them in those comic situations. Harlan, however, is not trying to hurt or humiliate Will, but to force him out of his box. Humour is not being used here only as a personal corrective (for Will), but also a “social corrective” (Duprey, 1981, 162), as through Harlan’s ‘lessons’, the value of community is emphasised not only to Will, but the audience. Will is even more confused when Harlan takes him to the Friendship Centre and shows him all the photographic equipment. When he asks, “What’s all this for?” Bertha mocks him by responding; “Taking pictures. Thought you said you were a photographer.” Will’s insistence that he only takes pictures of “wars and disasters” emphasises how he has distanced himself from his subjects and operates in a more expansive, international sphere – removed from any one community. Harlan and Bertha both mock this idea continuously by ‘confusing’ Malawi (where the film opens) with Montreal, bringing the audience’s (and Will’s) focus to the smaller world of Medicine River. Harlan doesn’t give up, despite the unwillingness of his ‘protégé’. When Will starts asking him about James, Harlan merely dances around the topic

once more and throws Will off by telling them they have to go. Harlan embodies what Susanne Langer, Wylie Sypher and the like pinpoint as the origins of comedy itself – the anarchic, subversive spirit of the carnival. This is emphasised by Harlan's delight in what Freud (1908) identifies as the childlike pleasure and freedom from inhibitions gained from "play and jest" (195), which Harlan attempts to pass on to the very serious Will.

As Will leaves the Centre with Harlan, he asks him what is in the bag that he has been made to carry around. It turns out to be a bright purple basketball vest for Will. As they head towards Harlan's car, a man who has been leaning on the bonnet gets up and walks towards the camera and then out of the shot, saying with a laugh, "He ain't no Clyde Whiteman." As Will and Harlan drive off, we hear Will ask, "Who's Clyde Whiteman?" Like Nobody's persistent "do you have any tobacco?" in Jarmusch's *Dead Man*, this is a refrain that appears constantly in the film and we eventually find out that Clyde (Byron Chief Moon) is the Medicine River Warrior basketball team's very talented centre, who also happens to have ended up in jail. Will is, of course, not Clyde Whiteman in more ways than one. Physically the two men are very different. Will is more like Thomas Builds-the-Fire in *Smoke Signals*, in his suit, and Clyde resembles the athletic and handsome Victor. Although ironically and humorously his surname is Whiteman, Clyde is nonetheless more connected to tradition and though younger than Will, knows and speaks Blackfoot. Clyde is not someone who plays by the rules and he is secure in his identity and his place in the community, unlike Will. Will has to learn how to fit in and this idea is explored when Will finds himself tricked into playing a basketball game. Clyde, however, also needs the guidance of someone older than him who can help keep him out of trouble and encourage his talents. This provides another reason for Will to accept his place in the community – he is not just wanted, but as importantly, he is needed – although it takes him some time to realise this.

The basketball game is an important and humorous scene, showing that Harlan the trickster is continuously in operation. He asks Will what size basketball shoe he is: "Size thirteen, right?" Will responds, "No. Ten, ten and a half." Harlan, however, hands him a pair of ancient, red Converse basketball shoes, size thirteen. He then tells Will that it's better that way as one can wear more socks and avoid getting blisters. Of course, Harlan doesn't have any more socks. The red shoes (like Harlan's Pontiac) operate as an apt metaphor. Not only

are they out of place amongst the other players' modern Nikes (which show that these are modern Medicine River Warriors, not stereotypical Hollywood 'warriors'), they are also too big. Will still has to learn how to fit into being 'red,' i.e. Indian and when he emerges on the basketball court, the camera focuses on his feet. The red shoes appear enormous, like a pair of clown shoes; an image emphasised by the clown-like music. When Will faces Lester (played by Thomas King), the opposing Mustang's centre, Lester looks down and says, "Nice shoes." Will is once again placed in a comic situation and we are encouraged to laugh at him, and his attempts at basketball. He certainly "ain't no Clyde Whiteman."

At the end of the game, Harlan introduces the 'love interest', Louise Heavyman (Sheila Tousey) and tells her that Will has been asking about her. He then tells Will that he hasn't seen her so taken with anyone in a long time. This, of course, is obviously not true from the expressions on their faces, but the trickster is not sitting still. He sets another of his plans in motion, perhaps aided by some knowledge of the future when the two do in fact come together, or just to create another reason for Will to stay in Medicine River. Louise Heavyman is an interesting character and importantly, is a central, fully realised *female* character. She is pregnant and unmarried by choice, and is strongly independent. As she tells Will at one point in the film, she doesn't want to have to bring up a husband as well as a child. Louise is not only intelligent, attractive, sexy and funny, but she is also a successful businesswoman. She is a welcome change from the passive Indian 'princess' (like Sonseeahray in Daves's *Broken Arrow*), who must sacrifice herself for the male protagonist. She knows what she wants and sticks to her principles and, in so doing, she resists the Hollywood stereotype – she does not allow herself to be persuaded to marry Will and allow for a traditional happy ending true to the romantic comedy genre. Rather, by the end of the film, Will and Louise are able to be comfortable in their love for one another, because they are comfortable within themselves.

The day after the basketball game, in an amusing scene, Harlan and Big John explain to Will the reasons for them needing to do the calendar. In a complicated, robbing-Peter-to-pay-Paul kind of situation, the resourcefulness of a people used to having to deal with red tape and bureaucracy is shown. As Harlan explains, tongue firmly in his cheek, they wanted a van to take the elders to "traditional social events, like hockey games and bingo's." The scene not



only provides humour, but also a convincing reason for Will to stay, as he will be helping out the (and most importantly, his own) community. It doesn't take Harlan long to trick Will into helping them shoot the calendar. Seeing Will's obvious reluctance, Harlan feigns ignorance about camera equipment. This does not work and so he plays his ace. He pulls out the one photograph James took for the calendar originally – a photograph of Will's mother just before she fell ill - and hands it to him. The camera moves to a close-up of their hands and as Will takes the photo, a drum beat starts up. It moves to a close-up of his face as he realises who it is. The camera then follows him as he moves over to the window, to look at the photo in the light, and as the camera frames him in the window, he looks out of the window, deciding to take the photographs while he is in town, waiting for James to return.

As mentioned above, Will's identity as a photographer adds an important element to the film, particularly when one addresses the impact photography has had on the image of Native Americans. As Liz Wells (2003) explains, photographs freeze a specific moment in time and display people, places and objects as they appear before the camera at a specific point – causing a “dislocation of time and space” (1). For early Native Americans, this meant the fixing of their image in an ethnographic past tense. Lucy Lippard (2003) highlights the fact that photography became an extension of colonialism - another of the “hegemonic devices... to isolate the Other in another time, a time that also becomes another place – the Past – even when the chronological time is the present” (346). Lippard pinpoints the lack of many Native American photographers working as artists today as due to this very role of photography in exploiting the Native American – documenting the supposed disappearance of Indian nations, relegating them to the past, and essentially making them “objects of study and contemplation” (346). Ethnographic photographers such as Edward S. Curtis and Roland W. Reed have created a legacy of “stoic (numb is a better term), wary, pained, resigned, belligerent, and occasionally pathetic faces” (347); images that have been cemented into what Lippard refers to as the American “communal memory” (347). This is what Susan Sontag (1978) describes as the danger of photography – the imposition of certain standards, expectations or designs of the photographer on the subject.

Interestingly, and cleverly, Will is set up as a kind of ethnographic photographer himself, and from the outset, is portrayed as being from the highly urbanised context of what Harlan

disparagingly calls “Taranna” (i.e. Toronto). In the opening scenes where Will is forced at gunpoint to take a portrait, the highly stereotyped African tin-pot dictator is, for him, a clearly defined Other and he is the Westernised, distanced ethnographer/recorder, contributing to a stereotype – despite the soldier’s choice of how the image should be shot. Later, when his agent/boss/girlfriend offers him “the Mandela thing,” the film emphasises the dynamic that has been set up between the experience of Native Americans and other ‘anthropological’ subjects – though ironically, Will does not realise he is contributing to the Curtis-type legacy. The isolation of the outside world is also once again set up in comparison to the comforting space of Medicine River. It is important, though, that Will is a *Native American* photographer, because when he is called upon to photograph his own community, he cannot plead cultural (or photographer’s) distance. As Lippard explains, “For all the separations inherent in such images, there is no such thing as objectivity or neutrality in portrait photography” (348).

When Will begins to photograph portraits of the Medicine River community, as opposed to “wars and disasters,” it becomes a positive way in which “to photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed” (Sontag, 4). Ethnographic recording, for Will, turns into the participation in, and the helping of, a community of individuals, with whom he is slowly able to identify. Sontag also explains a positive aspect of photography in that it enables people to “take possession of a space in which they are insecure” (9). Will is able to familiarise himself with Medicine River, and settle in more successfully through his photographs. The images themselves are incorporated into the film and are able to show successful *Native American* representations of other Native Americans, contradicting the stereotype of “stoic... occasionally pathetic faces” (Lippard, 347) – in particular the photographs Will takes of Bertha for a dating service. The various photographs also provide information for the audience on different aspects of the community – from school children to people at the race track – and they construct what, as mentioned above, Sontag explains as a “portrait-chronicle... a portable kit of images that bears witness to its connectedness” (8). The role of the community as a type of extended family is stressed throughout, culminating in the communal picnic photograph at the end of the film.

As Will starts to take photographs, therefore, the more negative and damaging aspects of photography are overcome in some way and he is simultaneously drawn further into the community. Harlan, helped by Bertha, also makes sure that Will and Louise are thrown together as often as possible, to further cement his connection with Medicine River. Bertha even sets Will up so that he arrives at Louise's apartment dressed for dinner and holding a bunch of roses. They both realise that they have been tricked into the situation and because it has been done with good intentions, they are amused, not angry and this merely helps their growing relationship. Harlan does not stop there, as he soon manages to con Will into taking on "the 'ain't no Clyde Whiteman', Clyde Whiteman" as his assistant. If Clyde finds work, he can stay out of jail and can then also play basketball. Once again Harlan predicts the future, by telling Will that Clyde looks up to him like an uncle (as Kilpatrick explains, this is an important and respected position in Native cultures), even though Will tells him that this is impossible as they haven't even met. Will and Clyde, however, do in fact build up a solid relationship and Will sees that he has talent, allowing him to take pictures and offer advice. Photography, once more, is used to bind and heal, rather than to distance and separate and as mentioned, Will begins to see that he is needed, as well as wanted.

Just as Will is starting to feel comfortable and is visibly more relaxed, having swapped his Toronto suits for jeans, boots and a cowboy hat, Ellen arrives. When she asks him if he is going to go back to Toronto and he tells her there is nothing for him in Medicine River, he doesn't sound too convinced himself. He tells her that his staying is not about his brother, it is about him, and we see that he is finally becoming aware of his growing sense of self and his acceptance of the community. The next day, a scene full of what Krutnik and Neale (1990) refer to as "comic surprise" (41) is set up. Will arrives to find the studio emptied of photographic equipment and as Clyde is missing, and we now know he was in jail for "sort-of robbery" (according to Harlan), we, like Will, are immediately suspicious. Harlan races him to Clyde's grandfather's, but of course gets hopelessly 'lost' in order to show Will more of the reserve. On the way, he tells Will that Clyde robbed the photographic store. Tension is thus built up and humorously undercut when we find out that Clyde's grandfather is Lionel James (Jimmy Herman) – one of the last two elders that needed to be photographed, and who never comes into town. Clyde has taken all the equipment to photograph him. Harlan, as expected, finds this hilarious and when Will demands to know why Harlan didn't

tell him, he simply replies, “You didn’t ask.” Will is once more made to look foolish, but this time he accepts the situation with more grace and patience.

Lionel James is an interesting revision of the ‘wise old chief’ stereotype. He invites the “boys” for a meal and cooks on a modern-looking barbecue, wearing an apron bearing the marvellous pun, “No reservations needed.” The camera pulls back to an establishing shot and focuses on the beautiful surrounds as Lionel tells Clyde, Will and Harlan that “Everybody wants to know about old dying Indians.” As Kilpatrick (1999) suggests, this is a very clever joke, particularly aimed at a Native audience, as it is a combination of the wise chief stereotype, along with that of the vanishing American<sup>7</sup>. The scene cuts to a spectacular shot of a vivid sunset, with a darkened hill in the foreground. Silhouettes of the four men are seen moving up the hill as Lionel tells them a humorous (modernised) trickster story: “It was a night like this that Coyote got on a plane to visit the Prime Minister. ‘We’re glad to see you, said the Prime Minister. Maybe you can help us with the Indian problem.’ ‘Sure,’ said Coyote. ‘What’s the problem?’” This scene shows the ability to laugh at the serious, which, as Corrigan (1981) states, “celebrates humankind’s capacity to endure” (8), and emphasises the fact that these are not “old dying Indians,” but adapted, modern Native Americans.

Will and Louise’s relationship develops, but Will is unable to accept her decision to remain independent, which prompts him to leave. His ego is wounded and his feelings of rejection cause him to accept an offer from Ellen – “the Mandela thing” – which will provide him with an opportunity to escape back to his old life. He decides to leave Medicine River once he has taken the final portrait for the calendar, that of Martha Old Crow (Maggie Black Kettle). He finally gets invited to see her and as usual, Harlan gets lost along the way. When he stops the car, Will says quite casually, “I suppose we have to walk the rest of the way?” Harlan’s tricks have had a positive effect and Will has relaxed. Instead of trying to avoid the situation, he enters into the spirit of things, even rolling down a gorge and wading through the river to reach Martha Old Crow’s. Martha greets them with a beautiful smile and jokes, “You boys come all the way up here for a swim?” Like Louise, she offers a positive female

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<sup>7</sup> This echoes the scene in *Powwow Highway* between Philbert and his aunt Harriet, whose anger is evident when he asks her about the ‘old ways.’ She tells him forcefully that she gets sick of being asked for “old Indian wisdom.”

character, and similar to Lionel James, shows a combination of wisdom and humour. She is also not an “old, dying Indian” and gives Will a run for his money, asking him if he is the one who is in love with Louise Heavyman, offering to teach him a song for his ‘daughter’. Will is a hopeless pupil and yet again, he becomes the comic object. Martha jokes with him, saying, “You hear that thump? That was some big elk falling over dead.” She also tells him that if he carries on singing so badly, he’ll freeze the river. Will takes this in good spirit, which illustrates that he is a far cry from the earnest man who arrived in Medicine River.

Harlan corners Will once more, by publicly announcing his departure at the celebration for the completion of the calendar. As he announces this, the camera picks up Will and Louise near the back of the hall, in an intimate moment. She looks at him a and then breaks away, leaving the hall. As Will follows, he is stopped by Clyde, who tries to persuade him to stay. He has come to look up to Will as an uncle figure, as Harlan predicted, and when Will tells him he can’t stay, Clyde looks at him scornfully and says, “It was fun while it lasted, ey?” Clyde’s disappointment in Will is obvious, because despite the fact that Will has changed, he has still not wholly come to accept his place in Medicine River, nor the accompanying responsibility. When Will has to take Clyde’s position once more on the basketball team at the championships, this time the ancient red sneakers fit properly. Harlan insists that to play well, they need to do think of what Clyde would do and above all, they can’t embarrass themselves in front of their relatives. It is more important that they don’t let down their community than looking foolish in front of their opponents, the Mustangs. When Lester says to Will, “You ain’t no Clyde Whiteman,” something within Will finally clicks. Although he may not be Clyde Whiteman, he realises he does have a proper place within the community and this gives him renewed energy. He does not want to let down his ‘relatives’ as he finally recognises the significance of relations and the importance of belonging to a community.

After the game, for the final time, Harlan leads Will down the ‘wrong’ path. Instead of taking him to the airport, he drives Will to the hospital. Will is confused until Harlan shows him the rattle that Martha gave to Will. The penny drops. When a nurse tells him his ‘wife’ has had a daughter, she asks him if they have a name for her. Looking over her shoulder, he sees the name of the wing and as a joke, he says, “South Wing.” This is a subtle, satiric moment, as

the nurse then says, “Oh, is that a traditional Indian name?” The other men of course laugh heartily (as, we assume, would a Native audience), and although Will mumbles something about it being a joke, the nurse believes him and writes it on the baby’s cot. This mocks the “‘real Indian’ flavour” (Kilpatrick, 205 – as perceived by whites) of the name. Harlan also plays on this when he goes to tell Will, who has gone to see South Wing, that they must leave for the airport. He enters the nursery and when the nurse asks him what he is doing, he says, by way of explanation, “it’s okay, I’m indigenous.” This mocks the stereotype of the mysticism surrounding Native Americans and plays on a stereotype. Will later watches South Wing sleeping in the nursery and starts trying to sing her the song Martha taught him. He then starts singing a silly name song and a nurse catches him as he breaks into a pseudo-traditional dance. When she asks him which one is his, he hesitates only for a moment, before pointing to South Wing. Kilpatrick states that this is in many senses true. She is now his relation because he has once more become a part of the community. This is emphasised by the next scene, where Will bails out Clyde from jail. Will has finally accepted the full responsibility of the important role of uncle. When the two leave the jail, Harlan is of course waiting for them, with a championship jacket for Clyde. He looks at Will and says, “Ain’t no Clyde Whiteman.” Like William Blake’s tobacco refrain in *Dead Man*, Will finally understands the statement and accepts what it means, and so he can laugh with Harlan and Clyde, as the joke is no longer at his expense.

The final scene of the film is the big communal picnic. Harlan suggests that Will shoot a group picture for the cover of the calendar and he agrees. Will tells Harlan about a postcard he received from James, from Sydney, and for once Harlan seems caught by surprise. He is immensely put out by the fact that he thought James was in New Zealand. The trickster has finally tricked himself. Will finds Louise and South Wing and as he lies down next to them Louise says, “Ninastiko.” He looks at her and South Wing, and affectionately says, “Must be home, then.” Will pulls out his rattle. Louise look sat it and pulls out one exactly the same. “Martha Old Crow?” she asks. “Martha Old Crow,” Will responds. They laugh as they realise how they have been set up and then in unison say, “Harlan and Bertha.” The trickster and his helpers have succeeded in restoring order and creating a happy ending, ensuring that everything works out for the best. Harlan interrupts their kiss and tells them they are ready for the photo but everyone now wants to be in it. As Will gets up to take the photo, Harlan

takes off his championship jacket and puts it on Will. “Size twelve, right?” he asks. “Size twelve,” agrees Will. The jacket is a perfect fit. As Will is about to take the picture, Lionel comes to him and insists that he be in it. Harlan tells him to use the timer on the camera and as Will looks at the group in front of him, the camera moves to a medium shot of Lionel and Louise, who both place a hand on the empty chair between them, indicating Will’s place. From being the lost, fatherless man unsure of his place and identity, he is now part of a strong, loving community and has been properly ‘adopted’ by them. He has finally learnt to move away from being the distanced observer and documenter, to become a true member of the Medicine River family.

As Kilpatrick suggests, the film is successful as a mainstream work because it has enough ingredients to satisfy the general audience - a love story, a homecoming, a “bonding buddies” theme and “even a sports event” (206). For Native and non-Native audience, these tropes are instantly recognised and enjoyed. The film, however, also offers something more than that. Although it focuses on an individual’s journey towards self-acceptance, the central focus becomes the community – a group of three-dimensional, fully realised people who don’t openly defy stereotypes, but who present alternatives. They are, importantly, also remarkably normal – loving and laughing and existing like any other group of people. In a way that is far truer to much Native American culture, and contrary to King’s fears voiced earlier, the film therefore favours the community above the individual and highlights the importance of close relationships and communal ties in the formation of identity. As the title of the film suggests, Will’s journey to his roots has involved a healing process. He has been able to find the balance between his heritage and his existence as a modern Native American, with the help of a very lively trickster figure and a community of strong, likeable individuals.

Dead Man

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An examination of Jim Jarmusch's *Dead Man* may seem somewhat digressive as it is not a film directed or written by a Native American, nor does it deal with the contemporary Native American experience. However, it is a particularly important film to consider as it shows how deftly the non-Native *can* in fact portray Native Americans as multi-faceted characters with complex language systems, senses of humour and self-awareness. What Jarmusch does, in essence, is to make some attempt to undercut the Hollywood legacy of the 'noble savage', the 'bloodthirsty warrior' or the monosyllabic, child-like 'celluloid Indian,' and portray a Native American character that is representative, yet simultaneously individual.

Though critics have had trouble classifying Jarmusch's film due to its many layers of meaning, major stylistic and narrative elements allow one to read it as a revisionist Western. A long-standing Hollywood genre, the Western has contributed much to the creation of the image (and of course the stereotype) of the Native American as Other and so it is an interesting vehicle for the kind of project that Jarmusch undertakes. It is the genre that has done the most damage in cementing flawed images of Native Americans and their culture and beliefs, and so a greater level of humour and irony in the film is achieved through this particular choice. In terms of the narrative, it is a useful choice as it allows the exploration of ideas of journeys into strange territories (in this film's case, the journey from life into death and the 'territory' of the spirit world), but can also be used, as Jarmusch describes it, as a "point of departure" (<http://www.nytrash.com/deadman>). It is a clever choice, too, in terms of the fact that at one level, Jarmusch is dealing with the Native Americans' cyclical view of time and the world, employing *the* quintessential classical linear narrative to do so.

The film opens with a close-up: a standard shot of a steam train chugging along its tracks. This immediately sets up the audience's expectations – we assume this indicates a journey, and from the landscape, as well as the black and white film, we could also infer that this is likely to be a Western (or at least a period piece). Once we move into the interior of the train and focus on Bill Blake (played by Johnny Depp), our suspicions are confirmed by his dress (though his "clown suit" is out of place and sets him apart from your usual cowboy hero) and that of those around him. Unlike the cowboy, who normally arrives in town on a horse, the 'dude' in his suit travels by train. Thus, although Jarmusch initially seems to be employing the classic trope of a train journey propelling the 'dude' out West to seek his

fortune, he swiftly undercuts this. The first five minutes of the film go by without dialogue or much action and our expectations are undermined, alerting us to the fact that this is not to be a conventional Western (or a conventional film, for that matter). Two particular images in these initial scenes of the film emphasise this “departure” from convention. At two separate intervals, Blake looks out of the window and from his point of view we see two icons of the West, and in turn, of the Western film genre. A battered-looking stagecoach lies abandoned amongst the bushes and although this is a central symbol of the move West, it also refers intertextually to Western classics such as John Ford’s *Stagecoach*. We can’t, however, have the cowboys without the Indians and so in another sequence, Blake sees a raggedy, deserted teepee – cloth flapping in the wind, as with the stagecoach. The very fact that these two obvious symbols lie abandoned emphasises that this is just what Jarmusch aims to do from the start– subvert the conventions of the Western and abandon all its stereotypes and tropes (or at least use them for his own ironic ends).

From early on in the film, this is made more evident by an interchange between the anti-hero Blake and a white-eyed, sooty-faced fireman (played by the ever-creepy Crispin Glover). Through the fireman’s interrogation of Blake, we find out who he is and where he is heading, plus the fact that his parents have died and his fiancée has left him (though we haven’t yet learnt his name). Blake then passes the strange man a letter of employment that he has received, and we have the first of many subtle and ironic comments in the film. The fireman looks at the piece of paper for several moments and then tells Blake that he can’t read, but that he wouldn’t trust anything written on paper. This is the first of the ‘in-jokes’ contained in the film, specifically aimed at a Native American audience. It recalls the idea of broken treaties and a suspicion of the written word – referring to the early treatment of Native Americans by European settlers. The joke acts on another level, too, as the ‘treaty’ is of course later broken by the shotgun-wielding Mr Dickinson (Robert Mitchum) - the irony here being that it is the white character, not the Native American, who is betrayed by the white capitalist<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> A similar joke appears in *Smoke Signals*, in a moment between Victor and his mother, Arlene. She makes him promise he will come back from fetching his father’s ashes and as she insists, he says: “Gees, you want me to sign a paper or something?” Arlene’s wry response is, “Nah, you know how Indians feel about signing papers.”

In some senses, Jarmusch's film can be compared to the kinds of attempts made by other non-Natives to create a positive image of the Native American – particularly in terms of the use of humour. Delmer Daves' *Broken Arrow* (1950), Arthur Penn's film version of Thomas Berger's novel *Little Big Man* (1970) and even to some extent Kevin Costner's *Dances With Wolves* (1990) have all tried to tap into the "comic spirit" (Weaver, 1997, 142) and delight in laughter of the Native American. The characters presented in these films, however, seem to form part of a greater socio-political agenda – one that Jarmusch's Xebeche manages largely to avoid. For example, an anti-Vietnam sentiment becomes evident in *Little Big Man*, particularly in a scene where a Cheyenne village is destroyed (reminiscent of the My Lai atrocities in Vietnam) and although this does speak to the destruction of many Native American nations, here the film turns the Cheyenne into a symbol. The destruction of their peaceful, nature loving, 'free love' way of life would speak to a vast cross-section of the audience of the seventies and strike a chord with anti-Vietnam supporters. The U.S. Cavalry destroying Native Americans at Washita, Wounded Knee or Sand Creek came to represent the actions of the American army in Vietnam. The film thus moves away from any kind of comment on the treatment and status of Native Americans as a people and relegates them to the past – supporting the stereotype of the 'vanishing American'.

Daves' *Broken Arrow* (1950), though one of the first sympathetic looks at Native Americans, also can't resist using the Native characters as a metaphor. As Jacquelyn Kilpatrick (1999) points out, the film emerged at a time when Cold War paranoia was rife and rampant McCarthyism dominated America. Many people, particularly those in the entertainment industry, were under threat of being blacklisted and thus, the Native American became a popular metaphor for all oppressed people. Although the film deals sensitively with the characters of Cochise and Sonseeahray in particular, they are still fairly flat (especially Sonseeahray) and they serve as a socio-political comment, mediated through the white protagonist. As Mary Alice Money (1997) suggests, during this Cold War period, images of a peace-making chief (such as Cochise) and the idea of peaceful co-existence were also employed in order to diffuse Cold War paranoia and to highlight the need for world peace. Jarmusch, in contrast, seems less inclined to delve into contemporary political issues and avoids generalising. He prefers to focus on a well-rounded individual Native American character who raises awareness and leads us on our own journey of enlightenment, but who

doesn't 'stand in' for anyone or anything else. This is particularly reflected in the type of character offered by Xebeche.

Unlike Cochise, Old Lodge Skins or Kicking Bird, Xebeche is not a noble chief or a medicine man, nor the 'vanishing American,' but rather an example of a trickster figure who seems to have less of the cultural baggage of the other characters. Cochise, and to a lesser extent, Old Lodge Skins are ultimately examples of the stereotypical wise chief (though they are allowed good senses of humour) and Kicking Bird is ultimately the shamanistic medicine man. The inclusion of a trickster is far more true to the humour in works by Native Americans such as Louise Erdrich, Tomson Highway and Sherman Alexie and points to the strong presence of tricksters in much of Native American belief. Jarmusch resists the temptation to mould the Native American character into an all-purpose metaphor and Nobody can thus be compared more easily to the likes of Harlan Bigbear in *Medicine River*. As Paul Tidwell (1997) describes, "the trickster dances...through history" (627) and thus it is much harder to pin him down - his very nature disallows his use as a symbol and so he is a useful choice for Jarmusch's complex narrative<sup>9</sup>. Like the fool in classic literature, he is free from laws, order or rules, is independent of space and time and remains "untouched by the terrors of reality" (Corrigan, 9) and thus cannot become a symbol for the oppressed or for anti-war sentiment. He also cannot be viewed as 'vanished' or 'vanishing' as he exists in his own world, and to borrow from Bakhtin (1981), his own "chronotope" (159)<sup>10</sup> - he always was, is and will be. As Jarmusch himself explains, he wanted a Native American character "who wasn't either A) the savage who must be eliminated, the force of nature that's blocking the way for industrial progress, or B) the noble innocent that knows all and is another cliché" (in Kilpatrick, 171).

Xebeche or Nobody (as he prefers to be called) is fascinating. He is of mixed tribal descent - a product of the warring 'Plains Indians' Blood and Blackfoot tribes. It becomes clear when he relates his history that he has no place with either group, and this is of course key to his

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<sup>9</sup> I use the masculine here particularly because Xebeche is male, however, the trickster, when in human form, can either be male or female (Wiget in La Vonne Brown Ruoff, 1990)

<sup>10</sup> Bakhtin (1981) explains the term "chronotope" as being the "connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature" (84).

trickster nature. Tricksters are shapeshifters (McCafferty, 1997)<sup>11</sup> and as Nobody has no fixed place, he is able to transverse boundaries and weave himself in and out of the narrative. Tricksters are often counted among the “original, uncreated beings” in traditional Native American beliefs (Wiget, 1990, 86) and thus they retain this transcendent ability, as well as being “uniquely realised and valued from one culture to the next” (*ibid.*). This could be seen, at least from Nobody’s point of view, to allow for his connection with Bill Blake. Nobody’s ability to imitate the English who captured him when he was a boy is another feature of his shape-shifting abilities. He is able to mimic his captors and fool them into thinking he has been ‘tamed,’ but he merely bides his time for his escape. His lack of fixed origin, as well as his adventures with the English also explains his linguistic dexterity– he speaks Cree, Makah, Blackfoot and, for a welcome change, pronoun-enriched English. This linguistic shape-shifting is also a key feature of a trickster – particularly as in some tribal beliefs such as those of the Ojibwe; it is the trickster and “culture hero... Nanabush” (McCafferty, *n.p.*) who brought them language.

Due to the lack of acceptance Xebeche has found in both Blood and Blackfeet tribe, he chooses to be called Nobody. Jacquelyn Kilpatrick points out that this refers intertextually to the name Odysseus chooses to travel under on his epic journey, and this contributes to the notion of the film as depicting a journey or odyssey, as well as emphasising the fact that for Xebeche it is safer to travel under an assumed name as he has been rejected by his people. If one continues to read him as a trickster figure, this points once again to his lack of fixed identity and his universality. It is also an important and poignant moment in the film when Xebeche tells Blake that after being captured, exhibited like an animal, then educated, he escaped and was “left to wander the earth alone. I am Nobody,” illustrating the loss of place, tribe, custom, way of life and the sense of alienation felt by many Native Americans in the wake of ‘civilisation.’ It also casts the trickster figure in a darker light – does the trickster have a place in society, and by extension, does the Native American? It is a subtle and effective comment on the part of Jarmusch.

The character’s name, of course, also lends great humour to the story in various places. For

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<sup>11</sup> McCafferty deals particularly with the beliefs of the Chippewa or Ojibwe group, but many similarities occur across tribes.

example, when Nobody decides that Blake must go down to the trappers as a “test,” Blake asks, “What if they kill me?” Nobody responds: “Nobody will observe” i.e. either no one will notice, or Nobody (Xebeche) will keep an eye on the situation. As Nobody is the trickster, we are not sure how this should be interpreted. When Blake reaches the trappers, they ask him with whom he is travelling and of course, he can honestly reply, “Nobody.” The puns continue later in the same scene, when Big George Drakoulis (Billy Bob Thornton) and Benmont Tench (Jared Harris) are fighting over who will get Blake (to whom they’ll do who knows what indescribable things) and Big George says: “I guess nobody gets you,” which of course he does, because all three trappers are killed and Blake remains with Nobody. This scene also speaks to Nobody’s trickster nature. As the “animate principle of disruption” (Wiget, 86), he forces Blake into an absurd situation for no particular reason, it seems, other than to create chaos. A humorous scene in itself, what makes it even funnier is Nobody’s ability to manipulate his white ‘side-kick.’ He uses the rather tenuous idea that “it is a test” to persuade Blake, but he gives no explanation as to what sort of test it is, or why he is testing Blake at all. He seems to be ironically playing on a preconceived notion of the wise Indian training his protégé to be a better “Indian,” but knowing already how useless Blake is, this seems to be more for his own entertainment than for Blake’s benefit. It does, however, force Blake to begin taking action and sets him on the path towards ‘speaking’ through his gun.

The casting choice of Cayuga actor Gary Farmer in this trickster role is important as this is not the expected stoic, chiselled Indian, nor the traditional Tonto-esque ‘sidekick.’ He is imposing, yet gentle, loquacious, yet frustratingly silent – ‘He Who Talks Loud Saying Nothing<sup>12</sup>.’ He is the actor who plays the loveable trickster Philbert in *Powwow Highway*, as well as the more problematic father in *Smoke Signals* - not an Adam Beach or Rodney A. Grant. He does not appear in the distance, bare-chested, with a large and impressive eagle feather headdress, nor with the sound of tom-toms. In fact his rather mangy headgear looks as if it may have been bought at an old Hollywood second-hand prop store and his striped ‘war-paint’ does not scare us, though it does terrify Blake. On one level, Jarmusch mocks the standard, classical (usually incorrect) representations of the Native American, but not at

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<sup>12</sup> As Kilpatrick shows, this is already an in-joke for those who are familiar with James Taylor’s “Talking Loud and Saying Nothing”

Xebeche's (or perhaps as importantly, Farmer's) expense. Nobody has grown up outside a tribe or people, and he has mixed parentage. His lack of community could point to his own constructed idea of what it means to be Native American through his perceptions of the correct 'look and feel' of the Native American as symbol. Cleverly, Jarmusch uses this idea to speak to the power of representations and how they can affect one's sense of self and identity, and also mocks the legacy of flawed filmic representations of Native Americans. This is reminiscent of the scene in *Medicine River* when Eddie Weaselhead and Big John Yellowrabbit have a go at each other because of their appearances. Big John has chosen to adopt the look of white/urban society in his "Italian silk and wool" suit, and Eddie tells him this is because he "thinks being an Indian isn't good enough." Big John, however, accuses Eddie of constructing his look from "airport gift shops" because he "likes to dress up like a Hollywood Indian." Both these characters have constructed their own identity around the complex ideological implications of dress – and present two sides of the greater issue of what it means to be a contemporary Native American. In Nobody's case, as an 'historical' character, he has chosen what he feels is the way he should appear to the "stupid fucking white man" lost in the wilderness.

What Jarmusch does is to allow the camera to favour Nobody, and we are encouraged to see his various emotions and thoughts play out on his face throughout (and Farmer does an excellent job). Incredibly, he has more than one facial expression, and the various close ups capture this. What this does, then, is to create a unique set of power relations. Here it is Xebeche who is in control and unlike in many films (even those sympathetic attempts of Costner and the like) Blake certainly does not (and cannot) 'out-Indian' the Indian. Poor Blake, the hapless accountant from Cleveland in his clown suit would never have seen an Indian, only heard the horrific stories of savages, so it is doubly humorous that he has to rely so heavily on someone who addresses him as "stupid fucking white man." The unique power relations also extend to the way in which Nobody chooses when he comes and goes, and this cements a reading of Nobody as a trickster figure. He is always on the move and is the one leading Blake into situations – fulfilling his trickster role in forcing Blake to come into his own and to recognise his true self, as well as having a bit of fun with him. Corrigan (1981) explains this role in terms of the fool's "primitive and magical license to strip us naked as he reflects the folly of all human endeavour" (9). Kate McCafferty (1997) raises the

interesting point that “to an extent, the character of the guardian will affect the destiny of the individual; its powers, behaviours, temperament, and desires lie in certain directions and are transferred to the human partner.” Nobody’s attempts to ‘strip’ Blake ‘naked’ take place with an underlying sense of the comic and it is his own sense of humour and character that create this. His continuous movement and spontaneity cause him to thrust Blake into unusual situations, with humorous outcomes – directing Blake’s destiny.

The ambiguities surrounding Blake’s identity, and Xebeche’s involvement in his self-development, adds to the humour of the film – creating one of its key extended jokes. We have heard Blake introduce himself when in Machine, but rather timidly as Bill Blake – and it is only once we meet Nobody, and we see his reaction to the name, that the implications of it are fully felt. Again, the humour operates on different levels. Perhaps what is funnier than the idea of a bumbling Lake Eyrie accountant being the namesake of the legendary Romantic poet, is the fact that the person who recognises its implicit irony is a supposed ‘savage’ Indian. It is not particularly clear whether Nobody believes this is the original poet William Blake, but as Kilpatrick suggests, it is perhaps more important that Nobody *chooses* to believe that he is. It creates great moments of irony. When Nobody asks Blake if he killed the “white man” who killed him, Blake replies that he is not dead. Once he has told Nobody who he is, Nobody responds by saying “Then you are a dead man.” This is funny in terms of the fact that it is technically true. If this is the real William Blake, then he died in 1827, and thus is a dead man. If we assume that, by this stage, Bill Blake has died from his gunshot wound and is also dead, this doubles the irony of the statement.

The humour provided by this issue of identity is carried further in the language of the film. Nobody is surprised that although he can remember Blake’s poetry, Blake himself remembers none of it. He recites Blake’s work at key points in the film – and the section quoted from the end of *The Auguries of Innocence* becomes a refrain in the film, picked up later by Blake himself in the confrontation with two marshals, Lee and Marvin. Earlier, Nobody has told Blake that his gun will “replace your tongue. You will learn to speak through it and your poetry will be written in blood.” The use of Blake’s poetry provides another level of humour that pokes fun at the notion of the sage Indian who speaks in riddles. In response to many of Blake’s questions, Nobody replies with a quote from Blake, and at one point, in



complete frustration, Blake shouts at him and says: “I’ve had it up to here with this Indian malarkey. I haven’t understood a single word you’ve said. Not one.” The viewer can appreciate the double irony – Blake does not recognise his ‘own’ poetry, or the fact that it is not Indian malarkey, but rather the words of the English romantic poet.

Jarmusch’s use of William Blake not only adds humour to the film, but another level of depth and meaning. Although Jacquelyn Kilpatrick describes him as “very English” (173), Blake was nonetheless a highly individual and revolutionary poet, with his own mythology and spiritual beliefs; perhaps a kind of trickster figure in himself. Jarmusch himself is not too clear on the reasons for his particular choice and states in an interview ([www.nytrash.com/deadman](http://www.nytrash.com/deadman)) that perhaps one of the main reasons is that so many of Blake’s ideas are similar to those of Native Americans – particularly in *Proverbs of Hell*, which Nobody quotes, along with *Auguries of Innocence*. As F.W. Bateson (1957) explains, much of Blake’s later mythology works with cycles – particularly of “disintegration and reintegration” (xxiv), as in much Native belief. By quoting from the *Proverbs of Hell*, as well as the *Auguries of Innocence*, Jarmusch (intentionally or unintentionally) draws on Blake’s “Doctrine of Opposites” (xxii). Blake’s notion that “Without contraries is no progression. Attraction and repulsion, reason and energy, love and hate, are necessary to human existence” (xxii), is clearly seen in the film. As we follow Bill Blake on his journey, he moves from a state of Innocence to one of Experience – a notion continuously explored in Blake (the poet’s) works. Perhaps unconsciously, Jarmusch therefore captures Blake’s own use of ambiguity and obscurity, ideas of imagination and vision, as well as the phantasmagoric quality of his writing and painting.

Language play is used to full effect in the film in the trading post scene. The racist missionary (played by Alfred Molina) sees Nobody enter, after Blake, and his blessing on Blake turns to a curse: “The Lord Jesus Christ wash this earth with his holy light and purge his darkest places from heathens and philistines.” Nobody’s response is once again (very aptly) to quote Blake: “The vision of Christ that thou doest see, is my vision’s greatest enemy<sup>13</sup>”. In those few lines, the attitude of the European settler to the Native American is

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<sup>13</sup> From William Blake’s *The Everlasting Gospel* (Kilpatrick, 1999).

shown, and the scene is heavily ironic as the so-called 'heathen' has a greater insight into what real Christian values should be. Along with Nobody's explanation of the selling of infected blankets to Indians and the treatment of Nobody by the missionary, Blake is given greater insight into the Native Americans' experience. One of humour's highest values is this ability to inform and instruct, and here Jarmusch uses it to its full potential to underscore his message. This technique runs along the lines of traditional trickster tales. As Wiget (1990) explains, these tales are often used to elucidate the "potential for abuse inherent in social structures" (90) and thus are ideal for criticising what Wiget refers to as "institutions of invading peoples" (90). What highlights Jarmusch's brilliance is that he uses this Native American storytelling tradition within the predominantly Western storytelling tradition of cinema, to mock that Western tradition (and all its associations), and to favour the Other.

Robert Corrigan explains the symbolic nature of the fool: "The mysterious freedom which characterises comedy's protected world is probably most fully embodied by the figure of the fool or trickster" (9). It is the trickster who "reserves the right to be the other" and whose very existence can be seen as an "indirect reflection of some other's mode of being" (Bakhtin, 1981, 159). The trickster is the one who unmasks and exploits his subject, and who externalises and exposes. It is therefore perhaps more useful to engage a trickster character like Nobody to impart a deeper level of meaning to the audience (for example, through his interaction with the missionary), than to allow an entire group of people to become a flat, all-purpose metaphor. Bakhtin places great value on this metaphorical nature of the trickster:

The very being of these figures does not have a direct, but rather a metaphorical significance. Their very appearance, everything they do and say, cannot be understood in a direct and unmediated way but must be grasped metaphorically. Sometimes their significance can be reversed – but one cannot take them literally, because they are not what they seem. (159)

This is especially evident when we regard how Nobody speaks – using the complex and layered writing of William Blake to humorously make his point.

A second running joke throughout the movie caters more exclusively, in Jarmusch's words, "for the indigenous American people" (in Kilpatrick, 174). As Kilpatrick notes, this is a highly unusual strategy – the continued privileging of the Other by a non-Native.

Throughout the film we have the recurring question: "Do you have any tobacco?" The first time we hear it is when Thel asks Bill, in what we assume is a post-coital moment. There is humour at that basic level, but the true significance is what privileges a Native audience, or at least one familiar with Native American custom. Tobacco, for the Native American, is seen as a sacred element that is used as an offering, as a gift or as an integral part of religious ceremonies (Kilpatrick, 174). This becomes more of a joke when, in Blake's first encounter with Nobody, Nobody asks him if he has any tobacco and he tells him he doesn't smoke – he is completely oblivious to the significance of the question, or to the role of tobacco itself. This is a code that privileges the Other, and for once, the humour is at the expense of the white character, and even the larger white audience. The way this initial encounter plays out also adds to the humour – Nobody rifles through Blake's jacket pocket and it definitely sounds as if he is swearing at him when he doesn't find any tobacco. Nobody's half-hearted (and rather dangerous looking) attempts to remove the "white man's metal" from Blake's heart are not the gestures of a benevolent medicine man saving the white hero, but rather of someone with nothing better to do. This adds to the impression that at this point he may not have bothered with Blake if he hadn't thought he could get some tobacco, or at least something of value, out of it. Due to Nobody's trickster nature, however, we cannot know for sure and in retrospect, it could merely form part of the trickster's plan.

The tobacco refrain echoes throughout the film, and as Blake's character and his relationship with Nobody develops, his answers to the question change. His stubborn "I told you I don't smoke," moves to a more playful repartee. After Nobody tells him he has traded Blake's glasses, he asks Blake once again for some tobacco. Blake tells him he has traded it, and when Nobody asks him what for, he responds with "Not telling." The joke is also carried through the scenes with the trappers, the missionary, the three bounty hunters, and of course reappears right at the end, when Blake 'gets it' and says to Nobody "I found some tobacco," which Nobody tells him is for his journey, to which Blake replies – in the last line of the film – "But Nobody, I don't smoke."

The same type of privileging is felt in other places in the film such as when Nobody, and later his Cree lover, speak in their own languages. There is an especially funny moment when the Cree woman shouts at Blake and Nobody says rather apologetically “She didn’t mean to call you that.” Blake is completely oblivious, and to a large extent so is the non-Cree speaking audience, though we’d love to know what she says. It is also important to note that Jarmusch went to great lengths to ensure the accuracy of the dialogue, as well as the pronunciation, and unlike Costner in *Dances with Wolves*, we are not given subtitles to make us feel more comfortable. For a few brief, yet highly effective moments, the usually favoured audience is made to feel the Other.

What this scene also does is to speak to other central aspects of the trickster figure’s nature. As McCafferty explains, part of the trickster’s shape shifting includes the ability to take the guise of various animals. As Blake walks through the darkened forest (Xebeche having left him earlier), he hears a distinctly animal-like noise and follows its sound. We then see what appears to be a bear, but the bear-like grunts and groans are actually of an amorous nature and emanate from underneath a bearskin. In another twist in the tale, Blake has interrupted what Nobody refers to as a “very romantic moment.” What Jarmusch seems to parody, then, is not only Nobody’s ability (or, if he can be seen in some senses as a self-made trickster figure, his actual inability) to take on an animal form, but also the traditional view of the Indian as animal – especially in a sexual sense. Here is the much feared ‘lusty savage’ satisfying his sexual hunger, as a bear would its appetite for food. This not only plays on a stereotype, though, but also speaks to the idea of the trickster as a sexualised being – Wiget (1990) describes the trickster as creating chaos and humour through “sacrilege, self-indulgence and scatology” (87).

An interesting aspect of Xebeche’s character is the part he plays in leading Blake along his journey of self-discovery. In some ways, the vision quest he imposes on Blake is problematic – and depends somewhat on how we read Blake’s death. If Blake has died in Machine or soon after leaving town, then Nobody is a spirit guide (i.e. is a spirit himself). If Blake is still alive when he meets Nobody, then one could ask why Nobody does not allow him to seek help for his wound – unless he knows there is no hope for him. He is then Blake’s *spiritual* guide, leading him through a vision quest and onto the right path to his eventual death.

McCafferty explains the importance of visions and how they come from various tiers of the world, bringing power to the seer. The powers can also embody themselves in animal form – which ties into the idea of Jarmusch’s play on the image of Nobody as animalistic. What McCafferty also illustrates is how the relationship between power and seeker in a quest is not hierarchical, as it is a vision that is sought out. In the relationship between Blake and Nobody, however, initially the power lies with Nobody. He is the one who finds Blake and ‘adopts’ him, and he is the one who comes and goes, but as Blake continues on his journey, he is the one who then finds Nobody. One could also say that because Nobody has existed outside of community and has not had much contact with his “own tribe” (as Blake says), he has made up his own rules, and acts as he will. Although at many times one-sided, Nobody and Blake’s relationship does turn into one of mutual understanding (even though it does take Blake some time): “Thus recognising an invisible relatedness, the spirits of diverse beings can unite to take each other on ‘cross cultural’ journeys” (McCafferty, 1997).

The power relations that play out between these two central characters are very interesting to map out, particularly as Xebeche moves himself in and out of the story. For the first part of Blake’s journey with Nobody, he allows himself to be lead and does not assert himself. A turning point is the ‘Indian malarkey’ scene when Blake, in frustration, shouts at Nobody. Nobody asks him, “Are you sure you have no tobacco?” and when Blake tells him again that he doesn’t smoke, it is almost as if this is the decider – Nobody then simply tells Blake he is leaving and rides off. Blake squats on a rock for a brief moment, and then realises he is lost without Nobody and thus follows him. A blackout leads us to a scene with the bounty hunters, reminding us of the threat that follows Blake, which then blacks out to a shot of Blake sleeping (now wearing Big George’s fur coat), being watched by Nobody. He wakes as Nobody performs a peyote ceremony and explains that he has just ingested the “food of the Great Spirit... Grandfather Peyote.” When Blake asks him, with an almost sheepish grin, if he can have some, Nobody tells him that “It is not for use even for William Blake. The powers of the medicine give you sacred visions that are not for you right now.” Nobody then completes the ceremony and his singing blends with the sounds of Neil Young’s guitar work, as we fade to black.

The musical score in the film is used to great effect, to create tension as well as to add to the poetic nature of the visuals. Kilpatrick notes that within the film, the scenes are set up like the stanzas of a poem, and fades act as line breaks would within a poem (170). The haunting guitar work adds to this, fading in and out, creating its own 'line breaks,' communicating meaning through tone and timbre, rather than lyrics. Jarmusch explains that he was listening to Neil Young while writing the script, as well as while shooting and had hoped from the outset that Young would perform music for the film (<http://www.nytrash.com/deadman>). The editor (Jay Rabinowitz) cut sequences of the film to instrumental sections of some of Young's existing work in order to show the musician how his music might work within the film's narrative, which helped convince Young to get involved. Most of the music used is electric guitar work and as Jarmusch states, "What he [Young] brought to the film lifts it to another level, intertwining the soul of the story with Neil's musically emotional reaction to it – the guy reached down to some deep place inside him to create such strong music for our film" (<http://www.nytrash.com/deadman>).

An important scene follows Nobody's peyote ceremony, beginning with a low angle shot of him, looking down at the sleeping Blake, who wakes up, somewhat unnerved to find himself being watched. Nobody smiles down at him, as he sees Blake's face transform into a skull (presumably a peyote-induced vision). Without answering Blake's question as to why he is staring at him, Nobody then takes ash and draws lightening bolts on Blake's face. McCafferty explains that in a vision quest, often the seeker will blacken their face with charcoal to appear dead to human appearance, and thus be more receptive to visions. Nobody thus gives us his own version of this. Looking down at Blake, Nobody laughs and says, "It is so strange that you don't remember any of your poetry." Blake responds: "I don't know anything about poetry," but then he also smiles, and finally we see that he is starting to 'get it.' He then tells Nobody that he is feeling weak and hungry, but Nobody will not allow him to eat. We thus begin to see his plan for Blake: "A quest for vision is a great blessing, William Blake. To do so one must go without food and water. All the sacred spirits recognise those who fast. It is good to prepare for a journey in this way." It is almost as if, at the point where Blake shouts at Nobody, he loses some of his passivity and ceases to be the "stupid fucking white man," and thus proves himself worthy of a vision quest and more able to complete his journey. When Blake starts looking for his glasses, we see Nobody put them

on, and grin at Blake. Blake tells him he can't see clearly and Nobody retorts, "Perhaps you'll see more clearly without them." Nobody is now, more than ever, forcing Blake to open his eyes and truly begin to see – to enter into his personal vision quest. Blake laughs and tells Nobody he is a "strange, strange man," and as he passes out, the trickster makes his exit, the glasses still perched cheekily on the end of his nose, and we have the distinct impression this is not the last we have seen of him.

When Blake wakes up the next morning, he finds himself alone, and as he calls for Nobody, the camera zooms out from him in stages – emphasising the fact that he is once more alone in the wilderness. When he goes to urinate against a tree, a close-up of the bark and a pan up the tree to its branches (from Blake's point of view) shows how he is starting to be more in tune with his environment, and is starting to "see more clearly". When Blake then encounters the marshals, Lee and Marvin (who look remarkably like the bumbling detectives, Thomson and Thompson, in the *Tintin* comics), they ask him if he is William Blake. He responds, "Yes I am. Do you know my poetry?" and shoots them without hesitation. He then stands over the two and quotes Nobody, quoting Blake: "Some are born to endless night." This adoption of the persona projected onto him by Nobody becomes Blake's own point of self-realisation, and he is finally the William Blake who has learnt to take action and "speak through" his gun, 'remembering' his poetry.

Blake sits in the forest, reminiscing over what happened in Machine. In a self-mocking tone, he echoes the words he said to Mr Dickinson's clerk: "I insist on speaking to Mr Dickinson." From the perspective of a growing new sense of self, Blake re-examines his earlier actions and we can imagine his self-contempt at allowing himself to be pushed around. He is a far cry from the East coast accountant who first arrived clutching his suitcase and as his character has changed, so has his appearance. The "clown suit" is covered up by Big George's fur coat and along with his lightening bolt 'war paint,' he is starting to look more like Nobody's idea of a Native American. Jarmusch plays with diegetic and non-diegetic sound to create a tension-filled scene, putting Young's music to good use. Blake is startled by a noise and we hear the ominous sound of wolf howls. As he looks around in fright, squinting without his glasses, he sees ghostly, sinister looking Indians watching him. Their war paint and costumes appear somewhat like Nobody's version of an Indian, and as

the camera cross cuts from Blake's face to the Indians and back, then to the disembodied head of an Indian, it becomes obvious to us that this is some kind of vision or hallucination. He can truly "see more clearly" without his glasses, and as McCafferty explains, the visions help him gain power. As he reaches for his gun, the Indians disappear, and the camera pans from left to right, scanning the bushes. Young's distorted electric guitar work bleeds in and heightens the tension – fading out as the camera returns to Blake as he starts to relax, sinking back with evident relief. He hears a rustling noise and cocks his gun, but the camera reveals a racoon shuffling through the bushes. The wolf howls continue in the background, however, and his horse whinnies skittishly. The guitar builds again and the scene fades to black. Like Philbert Bono's visions on the Sweet Butte Mountain in *Powwow Highway*, this is an important moment for Blake. His enforced vision quest has enabled him to "build power" and connect with the spiritual world, and he is one step closer to returning "To the place where all the spirits come from."

As we move into what we assume is the next day, and the continuation of Blake's journey, the increasing presence of Native Americans is felt. As he moves through a forested area, he sees two dead soldiers who have been shot with arrows. This scene cuts to the bounty hunter Cole Wilson (who by this stage has killed his fellow hunters and eaten one of them) who is on Blake's tail. As he is looking for signs of Blake, he gets shot in the heart by an arrow. Another blackout takes us to an interesting and poignant scene in the film. Blake comes across a dead fawn – one that has been shot in the heart<sup>14</sup> by a bullet (which echoes both Blake and Wilson's injuries). Blake approaches the fawn, and his horse and mule follow him even though he has let go of their reins. He tenderly touches the fawn's bullet wound, and then his own. He rubs the mingled blood on his face – adding to his 'war paint,' takes his hat off and lies down next to the dead fawn. In an interesting sequence, the camera looks down on this strange scene and then in a reverse shot, cuts to Blake's point of view, looking up at the trees above him. The shot spirals and we move back to his face, which is superimposed on the swirling trees. A final shot of Blake sprawled next to the deer fades to black. Blake is seen to be identifying with nature and life, but he is also being connected to images and signs of death (the soldiers, the fawn) and has become more comfortable with

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<sup>14</sup>There is a clever visual pun here on heart and hart – a synonym for deer.



‘speaking’ through his gun. A growing awareness of the interconnectedness of life and death, and the cyclical nature of life as emphasised by Native American tradition emerges – stressed by the spiralling camera in the deer scene. The seriousness of this scene, and Blake’s increased spiritual growth through his enforced vision quest/journey is humorously undercut by the scene that follows– that of the interrupted “romantic moment.”

The film’s many layers allow (and force) multiple readings. Within these layers, not only does Jarmusch privilege a Native ‘Other’ (in terms of one of the protagonists as well as the audience), but he also mocks his white characters, which creates further humour. Jarmusch also plays intertextual games that emerge in his casting choices, as well as the names he chooses to give his characters. We have punk rocker Iggy Pop playing Salvatore ‘Sally’ Jenko– the hick trapper in drag who tells the story of Goldilocks, reads from the Bible and tells stories of the ancient Roman emperor Nero, and an unrecognisable Billy Bob Thornton playing Big George Drakoulis. Two of the bounty hunters are Wilson and Pickett, recalling the R&B and soul musician of the 1960s/70s, best known for songs such as ‘Mustang Sally.’ The Thomson and Thompson-like lawmen are Lee and Marvin, a reference to the 1950s and 1960s actor who starred in films like *The Man who shot Liberty Vallance* and *The Dirty Dozen*. Steve Buscemi, who has appeared in other of Jarmusch’s films has an uncredited role as the barman in the saloon (Coleman, 1998), and various other well-known actors appear in cameo roles (Gabriel Byrne as Charlie Dickinson, John Hurt as John Scholfield, Alfred Molina as the missionary). Robert Mitchum (an actor whose career began with bit parts in Westerns) plays the cigar-chewing industrialist Dickinson. Once again, Jarmusch knowingly and irreverently plays with tradition and the ‘cultural capital’ of the Western in particular.

The use of black and white in the film also contributes to the layers of meaning. In an interview, Jarmusch explains that his reasoning for employing the technique was four-fold ([www.nytrash.com/deadman](http://www.nytrash.com/deadman)). Firstly, the narrative deals with a character who becomes further and further removed from anything familiar. The use of colour would have undermined this element of the story as it has an orientating function – more information can be conveyed in tone and hue, and concrete reality itself exists in colour. Black and white also functions to add historical distance – the film is set in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and so any familiarity with landscapes and objects is neutralised. Jarmusch also wanted to distance

himself from the standard “dusty colour palette” ([www.nytrash.com/deadman](http://www.nytrash.com/deadman)) of the westerns of the 1950s and 1960s and prevent the audience from making that association (furthering the project of a revisionist work). Rather, Jarmusch preferred recalling the look and feel of American films of the 1940s and 1950s, or of earlier black and white classics. He makes a break with the immediate past and returns to a more ‘classic,’ pure past to tell his story. The fourth motivation was due to the specific skills of Robby Muller, the cinematographer ([www.nytrash.com/deadman](http://www.nytrash.com/deadman)). Muller shot the film using the negative to include all the grey tones possible, and also to create a high contrast between black and white. The contrast between black and white also contribute to the idea of Blake’s “Doctrine of Opposites” (Bateson, xxii) and adds irony as not much in the film can be reduced to a case of ‘black and white.’ Black and white also gives the film a more dream-like, detached feel – suitable for a spiritual journey. The choice acts aesthetically, technically, and, also, contributes to the overarching narrative.

The film cleverly interweaves layers of humour and meaning, presenting the audience with a complex and often bewildering story. Fundamentally, though, what *Dead Man* achieves is to illustrate the possibilities for positive representations of the Native American, not just by Native Americans. One concern is that, like the works by Native Americans themselves, this is not likely to be a film viewed (or even perhaps enjoyed) by a wide audience. Though this particular film was distributed by a big company (the same as Eyre’s *Smoke Signals* i.e. Miramax), Jarmusch still remains an independent filmmaker, and does not have the clout in the mainstream movie industry to undo the damage done by generations of filmmakers in terms of positioning and representing the Native American. What is undeniable is that he makes a clever, humorous start, using and abusing Western traditions of storytelling.

Conclusion

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It is unfair, and unrealistic, to expect a handful of filmmakers to undo centuries of misrepresentation of a people. However, that is not to say that Native American writers such as Sherman Alexie or Thomas King, and directors such as Chris Eyre are working in vain. The four films discussed, whether collaborations between Euro-Americans and Native Americans or not, all show that it is possible to redress and rewrite the derogatory, stereotyped image of the Native American, bringing the 'vanished American' into the modern world. Perhaps what these films speak to is the necessity of a Pan-Indian response to issues of culture and identity of the Native American. These films, and others like them, may not change government policy, but they are at least a start, and illustrate and promote "creative adaptation" (Murray, 7) to Western society. The key issue is to ensure that this "creative adaptation" does not occur at the expense of Native American tradition or culture.

Jacquelyn Kilpatrick (1999) makes the important point that one cannot expect a profit-driven industry such as filmmaking "to carry the responsibility of preserving culture" (233). However, it is the film industry that has contributed much to the perceived image of what it means to be Native American (not only for whites, but Native Americans themselves). Television and cinema are pervasive mediums and affect us in social, emotional and even psychological ways. Unfortunately, mainstream cinema, even when dealing with the Native American experience in a positive and empathetic way, still has not been able to move away from a lone white male hero who ultimately ends up negotiating the Native experience. Kevin Costner's *Dances With Wolves* serves as an example of this, although the positive aspects of the film should not be overlooked or undermined by this aspect. Daniel Day Lewis's Natty Bumppo in Michael Mann's adaptation of *The Last of the Mohicans* is, unlike Costner's Lieutenant Dunbar, not only able to out-Indian the Indian, but also out-live the Indian. David Murray (1982) explains that revisionist works often only offer a "sentimental portrayal of noble savagery which just reverses the stereotypes rather than abolishes them" (9).

As Joseph Bruchac (1995) discusses, however, the flexibility and adaptability of Native American peoples themselves and the process of adaption and adoption shown throughout history (though largely ignored by Europeans), continues in the cultural sphere today. With the same flair that lead many of the Plains groups to adopt a horse culture from Europeans

and perfect riding and horseback-hunting techniques, many Native Americans have mastered Western literary forms, combining elements of the oral tradition and shaping those forms for their own ends. Although Stephen Evans (2001) refers to the Indian experience of “bicultural fragmentation,” there is, as Bruchac explains, a heritage of combining the Western literary form, with the content and purpose of oral tradition, to produce an original, “compellingly relevant” (1995, viii) form of its own. This success is evident in the works of writers such as Sherman Alexie, who, although criticised by traditionalists for favouring American popular culture, manages to combine tradition and modernity, bridging the gap between an Indian and a non-Indian audience (interview). The reality of Alexie’s identity as a *modern* Native American is reflected in this use of popular influences and this illustrates his attempts to negotiate his place within white America. There is also much to be gained in using the traditions and forms of the West, including popular culture influences, to attack those very traditions and forms – as Jim Jarmusch does very successfully in *Dead Man*.

Paul Tidwell (1997) emphasises the need for a kind of reciprocity – a successful communication across “cultural frontiers” which, he states, paraphrasing Edward Said, “can provide new forms of knowledge that are different in kind but not necessarily in degree from the knowledge held by any one culture”. The unidirectional response of white America needs to give way to a dialogical relationship – and collaborations such as that of Stuart Margolin and Thomas King to produce *Medicine River* show that it is an attainable goal. As Tidwell explains, the point should not be to speak for the Other, but to participate equally and take something away from the experience. The more audiences are exposed to contemporary Native Americans in a reciprocal relationship with other cultures and communities, the easier it will be to disprove the stereotype of the ‘vanished American.’

Politically, legally and economically, Native Americans have begun to have more clout and slowly, as Kilpatrick states, the image of the Native American is changing as the increasing presence of Native Americans in business (on and off reservations), law and politics is felt. The 1990s in particular (interestingly the decade within which the four films were produced) were a time of increased media coverage of Native American issues (Kilpatrick, 120). In 1990 alone, a peaceful revisiting of Wounded Knee took place without the negative publicity surrounding the 1973 AIM occupation; legal wranglings and arguments over spearfishing

rights were settled in favour of the Native Americans involved, and the Kickapoo nation was successfully relocated to its original home in Illinois. In the early nineties, the major issue of the appropriation of Native American symbols and icons as sports team mascots came under fire. When Native Americans objected to the use of the 'war dance' and tomahawk chop by fans of the Atlanta Braves, many teams moved to change their names and mascots, under significant pressure from concerned Native Americans. Unfortunately, as the car advertisement in *Powwow Highway* shows, there is a continued use of Native American cultural symbols to sell products. In South Africa there is the embarrassing example of the Spur steak ranch chain, which blends Arizona landscapes, Plains Indians weapons and costume (Hollywood style) with Pacific tribes' totem poles and carvings in their décor and advertising. As Kilpatrick illustrates, too, the Indian-as-metaphor still persists in the media, to support or refute different issues. For example (and Kilpatrick refers to American media in particular) the alternative press tends to employ the martyr angle, associating the Native American with antiracism and anti-capitalism issues. The environmental press stresses the 'Natural Ecologist' stereotype and New Agers embrace the spirituality of Native American tradition. The conservative press, on the other hand, uses the Native American to make claims about the expensive nature of maintaining tribes and reservations.

Native Americans themselves, however, are not passively accepting continued stereotyping and sidelining, and literature and film are just two ways of expressing the Native American experience. The four films examined all illustrate different aspects of Native American identity, community and history and highlight various issues of relevancy such as politics, misrepresentation, identity in the contemporary world and the importance of maintaining a balance between tradition and modernity. There are of course continued problems faced, particularly in terms of a general lack of funding. In the cinematic world, although there is a rise in the number of Native American directors and producers – for example, Victor Masayesva, Aaron Carr and George Burdeau – the majority of these are independent filmmakers operating on very small budgets. The propensity for documentaries (most likely due to lower costs, as well as the need for more accurate, self-created historical documents of the Native American experience) also reduces mainstream appeal, as the tendency of audiences is to favour feature films. Even though *Smoke Signals* and *Dead Man* were both

distributed by mainstream company Miramax, both received more accolades overseas (i.e. outside of the United States) and were not widely viewed.

As well as a lack of funds, there also appears to be a general lack of the representation of female Native Americans – despite the presence of many female writers (Louise Erdrich, Joy Harjo, Leslie Marmon Silko, for example). There is also the interesting ideological issue raised by David Murray. He poses the question as to the kind of spaces available for innovation among Indian artists, if (white) audiences still seek and expect ‘tradition’. The concept of “Indianness” is forced largely by white clichés – which illustrates just how difficult it really is to maintain a balance between cultural heritage and “creative adaptation” (Evans, 2001.). However, R. Bruce Morrison and C. Roderick Wilson (1989) discuss the Indian elder George Manuel’s concept of a ‘Fourth World’. Manuel explains that this refers to those tribal people who have been incorporated into modern nation states, but who firmly reject the concept of the Third World (and all its negative associations of poverty and backwardness), representing “two independent, yet intimately connected realities” (536). This concept offers a space for Native Americans to construct a positive identity, separate, but importantly not detached from, the outside world.

An underlying current in the films discussed is a sense of survival despite the odds, and this is particularly evident in the use of comedy and humour. To reiterate Robert Corrigan’s comments on the power of the comic, “It reveals the unquenchable vitality of our impulse to survive” (8). The comic provides a platform to satirically attack the hegemonic culture, to provide what Jace Weaver (1997) describes as the possibility for liberation and healing implicit in humour, and to offer a sense of renewal and change. As Weaver points out, too, the comic implies inclusion – a dialogic relationship between comic object, audience and instigator, which creates a collective involvement in “redefining and recreating the world” (142). D.J. Palmer (1984) shows that as well as being entertaining and celebratory, comedy is also instructive – teaching us what is useful and what is not, which supports what Bruchac (1995) explains as the function of traditional stories: to entertain and to offer some kind of moral instruction (viii).

George Manuel's 'Fourth World' aesthetic, therefore, seems to be filtering into the cinematic arena and the more Native American stories are told, particularly by Native Americans, the sooner we can be exposed to the "American Indian as real, complex people with ideas and cultures that have deep roots and flourishing new growth" (Kilpatrick, 177). The point, of course, is not to ignore the realities of alcoholism, poverty, continued governmental abuse and racism faced by Native Americans today, but to show that, miraculously, despite these issues, a diverse group of Native Americans survive in the contemporary world. Laughter, as Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) explains, helps to reduce our fear of something, so that we can approach the world realistically and as Darby-Li-Po Price (1998) shows, "much of Indian humour is targeted towards revealing the shortcomings, errors, and contradictions of the dominant culture;" helping Native Americans to negotiate their place as a nation within a nation, and to strike a balance between dwelling on the past and addressing the reality of the contemporary Native American experience.

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